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Engaging with the World: Integrating Reflections and Agency

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And you may find yourself in another part of the world . . .
And you may ask yourself, “Well, how did I get here?”

—Talking Heads, 1980

I have been wrestling with that question since I was first asked how a National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) Honors Semester led me into public high school education and how I use that Semester’s experience in my life and work.

When I first participated in the NCHC United Nations Semester in the fall of 1984, I did not imagine myself anywhere near a public school classroom. I was focused on changing the world and working for social justice. I did my independent study project working with the Riverside Church Disarmament Program, regularly checked in at the old War Resisters League office,¹ and in the spring returned to my home college of Oberlin to participate in and eventually lead the Lorain County Peace Education Project. The community we had developed at LIU Brooklyn during that semester was inspiring and action-oriented, and it set me

on a course that I imagined then was of global impact. In 1985, I went to the Soviet Union as part of a national study tour. I served as an intern in the U.S. House of Representatives. I participated in national demonstrations, getting arrested at the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, in 1987. That summer found me in China as part of a “peacemaking tour.” I moved to Corvallis, Oregon, doing volunteer work and landing a brief stint as an adjunct instructor in the Oregon State University Honors Program, teaching classes on the cultural impact of the Cold War and Post-Reagan America. On Mother’s Day, 1988, I participated in demonstrations to close the Nevada Nuclear Test Site. I returned to China that summer, leading a group of teenagers for the YMCA in one of its first ventures to China as part of the International Camper Exchange Program. At that point, I probably should have realized my true trajectory. Instead, I moved back to New York and began a short stretch at the New School for Social Research with the thought of earning my PhD in international relations.

In 1990, I returned to the Soviet Union and saw the coming changes initiated through Glasnost and Perestroika. I met with representatives of Birlik in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, and Rukh in Kiev, Ukraine, prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union. I moved to Washington, D.C., canvassed for SANE/Freeze out of the Washington, D.C., office, and then went to work for a small independent school at their Nature Studies and Outdoor Education campus in Capon Bridge, West Virginia. After two years there, I eventually found my way to the University of Denver’s Graduate School of International Studies.² Somewhere in the midst of all that came the rest of life, those moments that weave us further into the human fabric—finding love, creating family, raising children, breakups, redefining family, and navigating age.

When I was asked to reflect on how I use the experiences of my NCHC Honors Semester as a public school teacher, I took the opportunity to explore exactly how I had arrived here as a high school teacher some thirty years later. A short two years before we embarked on our U.N. Honors Semester, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* had initiated the criticism that our public schools were failing their students. We were challenged

as faculty, as students, as a society to do better, yet the report also seemed to launch an existential threat to public education. I did not initially rise to this challenge. I acknowledged the criticism that *A Nation at Risk* posed and that had originally kept me away from pre-college education. I saw it as a not-so-veiled threat to the existence of public education. I initially shied away from working with youth, especially in formal educational settings, because I viewed it as too entangled and constricting. The work seemed treacherous, unprotected, and precariously short-lived. I also naively perceived public school teaching as intellectually and academically unrigorous. I imagined myself grounded in the protected corridors of college life, with “students who wanted to learn,” operating with “academic freedom,” truly living the “examined life.” I was the child of a college professor. I went to an “elite” college. I was the alumnus of an NCHC Honors Semester. The more I pursued those “imagined communities”³ of idealized academia, the more those imaginings guided me toward the arena of secondary education as a place to effect real, meaningful change; this was the cauldron that I entered as I went into the teaching profession and ultimately what I feel I had really been educated for over the course of that honors semester so long ago.

The core experience for the U.N. Honors Semester was the City as Text™ seminar, which was the invitation not just to learn the semester’s content but to live it. I remember the broad representation of students from across the country, our diversity of interests, and our perspectives on life, family, and politics. We heard from one participant about brothers who participated in combine demolition derbies, from a hydrology major from the arid Southwest, from a Puerto Rican who challenged our national perception as a country with a description rather than a name, from a Staten Island native who proffered the idea of local secession from New York City, and from me, a young white man from the American South with a suffix of III, wary of preconceived identities that may have been placed on me. I thought I knew who I was but was uncomfortable with how others might perceive me based on those all-too-familiar archetypes of the “Deep South.”

What we learned in those first days about creating community with our diversity of talents is what has stayed with me. The exercise of finding and interpreting Henry Moore statues scattered around the city was profound in its elegance. We had our team of four, our list of statues, and a loose agreement among our team members of where and when we were going to meet to find the statues and begin our exploration of the city, our community of students, and ourselves individually. If I remember correctly, we launched separately in our self-assertive independence, haphazardly finding our way to the same space in the Bronx and that first statue. Life does not always go as planned. Sometimes we take different paths or trains, but the basic hopes and desires are the same, and when we arrive in that space, our arrival is serendipitous. That same spirit of exploration combining both individual and community activity is what I hope to bring to my classroom on a regular basis. Now, some days the lessons go smoothly and straight to their mark, and on others we wander until we see the artifact of our intent. In the aftermath of those moments, these personal connections, the certainty and power of the lesson are realized. What is demonstrated on parchment for graduating is one measure of success, but the true indicator for me has been in those students who circle back around, sometimes the next day, sometimes on graduation day, sometimes years later, and acknowledge what transpired in that community of education.

In the aftermath of my honors semester, I have enjoyed seeing who we became. Many of us went on to be professors, environmental lawyers for the EPA and NRDC, even jurists on state Supreme Courts. I still recall long discussions with faculty over what a Henry Moore statue really meant or how some level of decadence was needed for a successful revolution. We went to block parties in Brownsville and concerts at the Garden; we walked the city at all hours to find what made it and us work. This grounding in a living education was fundamental and is what I continually search for in my work today. How do I bring the material to life? What do I have to offer in the classroom with each block, lesson, or unit? The quintessential element for me is to make the subject real, to give

students the space to explore, breathe life into the subject for themselves, and ultimately see the relevance of whatever we are studying in class to the world they are building.

The practical application of my NCHC Honors Semester has been my own continual pursuit to improve how I can ask the questions, present the content, and infuse my class with a rigorous and engaging curriculum. I did not graduate with an education degree but went to work where I was accepted for my content experience and willingness to challenge myself. I “cold called” high schools in the Denver area that were part of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. The school where I was offered a job took a chance and supported me as I went through the alternative licensing program. In my work with the IB program, I have seen the success of many students who have pushed themselves to reach a new conception of themselves. I have been fortunate to find a match for my own developing sense of andragogy⁴ and the manner in which we implement the IB program as an open challenge for any of our students. This democratic conception of a high-quality education available to everyone was furthered in those classes with NCHC instructors like Ann Raia, Mark Naison, Bernice Braid, and John Ehrenberg. What I learned from my NCHC Semester was how experiential learning and community can challenge, engage, open doors, motivate, and inspire. Fundamentally, I have tried to incorporate that ethos, in some fashion, into all my classes.

In my second year of work, there was a new challenge when my school was mistakenly identified as the site of the Columbine shootings when the national press referenced a Littleton, Colorado, high school (I teach at Littleton High School). While our pain was insignificant compared to those actually at Columbine High School, the resonance of that moment was the significance of building community as the paramount work of education. I went into public education during the early stage of a growing pall over the profession, which has continued until today. The fundamental challenge of education in general and public education in particular remains how to make it meaningful. Amid Common Core, “No Child Left Behind,” “Race to the Top,” Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA),

standardized testing, Value-Added Models, Student Growth Percentiles, Professional Learning Communities (PLC), Response to Intervention (RtI), and a myriad of other measures, the relationships with students that we build as educators are as powerful a tool as any (“Relationships and Learning”).

I would argue that this building of community and grounding of learning is what we benefited from the most in the experiential approach of the NCHC U.N. Honors Semester. What came of that semester in the fall of 1984 at LIU Brooklyn; the U.N.; and New York is that I became a public high school social studies teacher. The path I set on from those NCHC Semesters experiences led me out into the world. I have been there ever since, hoping that I challenge my students in ways that I was challenged by that long-ago NCHC U.N. Semester.

ENDNOTES

¹I knew I had been away from NYC for a while when I was waxing nostalgic for the old “Peace Pentagon,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/13/realestate/commercial/the-peace-pentagon-an-activist-office-in-noho-is-forced-to-move.html?_r=0>.

²The name has since been changed to recognize one of the founding faculty members, now the Joseph Korbel School of International Studies.

³The need to establish ourselves and our identities in those created communities of mutually held beliefs seems even more significant and worthy of reflection in this most recent election cycle. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, <<https://www2.bc.edu/marian-simon/th406/readings/0420anderson.pdf>>.

⁴While the distinctions in educational terminology are not completely adequate here, I chose andragogy as the broader conception for approaching educational practices over pedagogy and its limits to only being about children. I find myself working to more fully conceive and implement practices for how we learn and develop our learning over the course of our lives, a continuum not as a process restricted to adolescents. See <<https://infed.org/mobi/andragogy-what-is-it-and-does-it-help-thinking-about-adult-learning>>;

<https://mytoolbox.com/2019/05/21/6-keys-to-facilitating-adult-learning>; and <https://gjismyp.wordpress.com/2011/04/19/pedagogy-vs-andragogy>.

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