Undrowning
A Rediscovery of the Power of Student Voice

Last summer, Nannette Overley, a teacher-consultant with the Central California Writing Project, attended a National Writing Project-sponsored workshop designed to involve teacher-consultants in the work and methods of the Centre for Social Action (CSA), a social service organization based at DeMontfort University in Leichester, England. At this session, CSA promulgated some basic principles that drive its work with the underserved and dispossessed. In this essay, Overley expresses her understanding that CSA's core ideas are also the principles that she has independently discovered are central to her successful work with alternative high school students.

BY NANNETTE OVERLEY

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

—Paolo Freire

I wish I could say that my 30 years of teaching have been smooth sailing, but the truth is that in spite of my expanding knowledge of subject matter, pedagogy, and young people, I inevitably drift off course. It is as if I am sailing with three lines in each hand, several in my teeth, and constantly being handed new ones. Of course I have to drop one line to grab another. And sometimes the lines that I let go of are the very ones that were keeping my course true. At those times, it is collaboration with my colleagues in professional organizations like the writing project, and the voices of my students, that serve as my compass.

As an alternative high school teacher, I have spent the last 20 years in classrooms with teenagers who struggle with, or worse yet, won't bother to struggle with literacy. There is much apparent public concern that we bring these students "up to standard." Some blame the young people themselves for their failure to perform in school; others turn to "experts" for solutions. Most currently, standards, accountability, and testing are somehow expected to prompt us to successfully educate these youth. Yet I believe it is the young people themselves who can tell us the most about how to effectively teach them. This said, however, I know that despite this knowledge, I often lose focus, lose faith, or lose my nerve.

Best Teaching Practices and the CSA

Last year, I was drowning in a sea of policy, politics, and district responsibilities. My renewal was provided at a seminar sponsored by the National Writing Project and facilitated by leaders from the Centre for Social Action.

This collaboration between CSA and NWP, offers the educational community a process by which marginalized youth can empower themselves, through literacy and collaborative problem solving, to take action on their own behalf.

As I reflected on my CSA experience and reviewed the guiding principles of the organization's work, I realized that my best teaching has resulted from following a process very like CSA's process. I work with a group of marginalized Latino students at the Ark Alternative School in Santa Cruz, California. These students do not do things just because they are told or asked or assigned a task. They decide for themselves what is worth doing and what is not. Needless to say, this routinely creates havoc in classroom life. So it was more out of desperation than inspiration a few years ago that I discovered the power of letting students uncover their own need for literacy.

CSA Principles Number One and Two

People have skills and understanding they can draw on to tackle the problems they face; and all people have rights, including the right to define issues facing them and the right to take action on their own behalf.

The issue that many of my students focused on was the disempowerment they felt in school:

Some teachers see me as inferior, different from the other students, simply because of my way of dressing, the way I express my ideas. They think that our ideas don't count, because of our culture. I think they are very wrong, because we will have a better future if we exchange our cultures, and listen to each other with the same attention, regardless of our race or culture. - Jorge

Another student, Mauricio, has a clear idea of one way to take action in order to affect the future to which Jorge refers.

I want to learn English well, so that I can go to school and give talks, like the students from Cabrillo (the local community college) who came to talk to us. I feel stronger, because now I feel that I'm not the only one thinking these thoughts. So knowing this, I would like to get together with others, talk to them, find others to join us. With more people, we will be able to control more. It isn't about control, being able to say "I control this or that." But about being able to say, "Okay, I have this to give my people, to make the community have more work and more opportunities for all the Latinos of the community." And to try to get stronger, so that we can be treated with equality.

Principle Number Three

People who lack power and influence can gain it through working together in groups.

First, we need to be united. To accomplish change we should be united. If you are just one person, others don't listen or pay attention. I could talk to others, especially the adults. Adults regard young people as ignorant, as if we know nothing. This isn't true. - Marisa

Principle Number Four

Individuals in difficulty are often confronted by complex issues rooted in social policy, the environment, and the economy. Responses to them should reflect this understanding.

I feel, not that I have the power to change things, but that I want to do it, and that if I try very hard, and some of my companions
Principle Number Five
Workers do not “lead” the group but facilitate members in making decisions for themselves and controlling whatever outcome ensues.

I made the decision not to lead. Letting go of control was terrifying for me. Many days seemed so scattered and unproductive that I felt we were getting nowhere. Alexandra was in juvenile hall again. Mario was home taking care of his twin sisters. Those who were in the classroom were enraged at the principal, who had suspended two of their classmates the day before. And, of course, they needed to talk about it. I feared that by giving priority to their discussions, as rich as they often were, I was neglecting my responsibility to their literacy learning. But slowly, we gained momentum. As a class, we struggled through texts by Malcolm X and Sandra Cisneros, learning about those writers’ own tumultuous journeys toward literacy.

Students wrote about the forces that influence their daily lives. Francisco wrote about the pressures he felt as a newcomer to claim gang affiliation and about the social isolation he felt as a result of his choice to remain neutral; Rafaela told her story of crossing the border; Mario set down how it felt to have doors closed to him at every turn because of his illegal status. Their motivation was always to be heard, be seen, be understood. “This is what I want you to know about me” was the unspoken and urgent demand in most writing and conversation.

The experiences that the students led us through that year changed their relationship to literacy forever. The students discovered the power of literacy to define themselves and their situations, to reflect on why these situations exist, and to take action for change by sharing their stories.

For me, the opportunity to connect with colleagues from the Centre for Social Action allowed me to unburden—or undrown—myself, to true my course, and to recommit to an approach to literacy teaching that truly empowers young people.

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