



Teaching in Action: Students in the Community

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Researching Their Own Questions

What I'm going to specifically talk about is my work. My most recent school that I taught at—the Boston Community Leadership Academy, it's one of the pilot schools in the Boston public schools. And what I was charged to do when I was hired, and what I did for two years while I was there, is to create and teach something called the "Senior Capstone Class." And the Senior Capstone Class is really predicated on the mix of a couple of major components.

The first one is—as a history teacher I really wanted to bring in local history case studies, and so what we did is we made a particular focus on local history in the Boston area. We looked at industrialization in the Lowell Mills and the Lowell Mill women, we looked at desegregation in the Boston public schools in the 1970s, and we looked at this really fantastic organization called the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. It was the first community organization that really achieved eminent domain and took over really hardened parts of the city and turned it into a community development area. And so that's one major component, the history case studies.

The other is really looking at youth activism as a model. Really trying to build an identity of youth as ones who aren't necessarily at risk. Ones who don't get those right test scores, ones who are typically struggling, but saying, listen—we have this incredible background historically of young people who have really stood up and really created an identity for themselves.

And what I really try to do is present other groups of youth across the country who've really organized themselves in really powerful ways. We look a little bit at the city of Boston sociologically and what are the different indicators that measure the success or health of the city. And then we embark on a pretty extensive Participatory Action Research process (PAR), where students themselves as researchers, they identify an area of concern that directly affects them.

And what they do after that is we connect them up with internships that are appropriate to those questions and guide them on a pretty extensive research process—secondary *and* primary research. And they ultimately write pretty lengthy research papers; the name for it is the "forty-page research class," and they love saying that, they love complaining about that. And they create their own websites and video presentations.

So it's a model that, you know again in a—I wouldn't say we're a typical urban Boston public school, but you know we have urban Boston public school kids and you know to look at where they are from the beginning to the middle to the end it's really remarkable.

Schools as Part of Communities



I mean, I think the focus of the Teaching Ambassador Program is to say that there really—systemically at federal, the state, and the local level—is a lack of structured opportunities for teachers to impact the policies that affect our work. And so one of the things that I focused on in my Teaching Ambassador fellowship year was the full-service community schools model.

And I know that too with Secretary Duncan there's a renewed interest in that type of model of . . . sort of real lateral horizontal relationships, where schools are not just seen as places that are used during the school day for kids, but they really are an active part of the community; adults use them, we integrate health services into them, dental services, tutoring, extracurricular [and] different activities.

That's something that really connected really well I think to my own teaching interests, because part of the Capstone class was all about saying, "Listen, it's all about context. It's not just you and this class, and you're going to get a grade and then you're going to go on about your life. We're studying things that are of intimate importance to *you*, your family, [and], you know, your community." And that—it becomes the subject of our study and it also becomes the product of our study as well. It's all about improving the communities that they live in, and that's the best motivator.

The context is, I think, the part that I try to spend the most time on. I think conceptually that's the hardest thing to do. And in my opinion part of why I designed this course and how I teach is it's all about creating opportunities for students to define themselves and to create social and academic identities. Beyond just "hey, I got a really great grade in this class" or "I got into this college"; what I look for are sometimes those intangibles, of them saying, "I can do this. I have this confidence. I can go into this work setting and kind of get information I need for a research paper. I can turn this into some sort of substantive product I can present—present actual recommendations or suggestions to this organization and they respect me." And I think those are the pieces that I really hopefully build towards as meaningful in the class.