Social Justice Capstone –the Final Lesson

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Throughout this course we have attempted to provide practical lessons in social justice.  These practical lessons have included progressive/dynamic/praxis oriented reading, intensive discussions, service learning, and critical reflections.  We have not only attempted to not only talk the talk, but walk the walk of social justice through modeling, consensus building, and dialogue.  This process extending out to the wider community was placed into practice through service learning and activities.  At the core of all of our efforts has been the centrality of social justice as not only theoretically important, but also as a practical necessity.  And so here we are, at the end of a long, difficult and challenging semester.  How shall we conclude?

Normally, the conclusion of one’s course of study in an individual class or a set of classes there is a need for closure.  This closure is typically part of what many call the final lecture or lesson.  I shall use this forum to provide this closure.  First let us revisit the various elements of social justice that we discussed.  We began with social justice is an element of the sociological imagination whereby we imagine some future state where conditions of fairness prevailed.  Fairness, it was discussed, implied systems of equity and not equality.  In reverse order, we identified that Democracy incurred a paradox where both equality and freedom were asserted.  But, given the reality that freedom (which means the ability to make choices unhindered by accidents of birth-circumstances or the constraints of history) and equality (providing the same to all, regardless of accidents of birth or constraints of history) are diametrically opposed.  For if we consider a pure state of freedom, where everyone has the same /equal rights to make decisions, different decisions will lead to a perpetual state of inequality.  Hence, the paradox or central question of/for democracy is how we ensure both freedom and equality.  Further examination of the terms, allowed us to determine that equality is a beginning state.  Where we are all assumed, or allowed, or provided an equal starting point.  Therefore, we assume that if every child gets access to an excellent educational foundation, then any outcomes of this process are those of choices.  Choices -such as the motivation to work or not, the willingness to achieve or not, the decision to excel or not –underlie the practical application of freedom and is reflected in our various notions of meritocracy.

In the observation that in a perfect world and in the perfect democracy meritocracy should govern outcomes –we believed that we had achieved the perfect society.  Further reflections, however, demonstrated that while we could through our sociological imagination conceive of this perfect society –the reality that confronted us was far from perfect.  The imperfections associated with centuries of racial, gendered, and class defined structures and opportunities placed severe limitations on some while providing others excess.  Therefore, within our society birth, gender and racial identity provided definite status, incentives, and access that precluded the just operation of either democracy or meritocracy.  Equity –where one is afforded opportunities based on need and not status –was determined to be a qualifying condition to ensure social justice.

Having determined these basics for social justice, we attempted to apply them to practical situations within both the class room and the wider community context.  Discussions within class determined a set of issues that various students deemed important and that they would like to explore in service learning situations.  Based upon these issues, student clusters and groups were identified.  Students were then charged to go into the various communities to which they had access and nurture relationships with specific community based entities associated with these problems.  (At the University the Office of Student Engagement was suggested as a community resource of last resort.)

When it came to actually working with the community partners, we began with the idea that we were not attempting to fix the problem; for in fixing the problem we often wind up problematizing the community/individual/or situation.  Thus in our attempt at fixing the problem we seek to fix the person, the situation, or the community.  Rather than fixing the problem, we sought to become collaborative partners with specific community entities/organizations.  We brought specific skills to the table and they brought specific insights/programmatic resources/and information.  Collaborative the student teams met with their community partners –with both mutually benefiting and sharing.   You as students began with a series of questions such as: 1) what needs did the community organization/entity have: 2) what types of services they would like to be provided; 3) what specifically could they accomplish within a 10 week-40 hour time frame?   The projects developed reflected this process ranged from sex trafficking to mentoring/tutoring, from homelessness to sexual abuse, and from advocacy to policy.

Service learning contracts, reflecting these issues, course objectives, and community organization/entity objectives were developed, signed, and presented.  And after 15 weeks, we have seen the conclusion of your efforts.  Several fantastic projects were developed, completed and presented.  Some, reflecting over reaching and far too ambitious (given both time and other resource limitations) did not come produce a final product (given the expectations) but nevertheless produced results that demonstrated the basic tenets of this course, met its objectives, and clearly provided the kind of outcomes that facilitated learning and collaborative service.

Now, all that is left for us is to provide closure in this the final lesson.  And what is that lesson –at the end of the day, and at the core of any kind of social justice frame of reference is the idea of forgiveness.  Forgiveness, found in every major religion, is basic to our very notions of democracy.  As Semyon Frank, Russian Philosopher, observed in 1942 “In this terrifying war, in the inhuman chaos which reigns in the world, the one who first starts to forgive will in the end be victorious”.  It is strange that this came out during the very heart of war, in the very nexus of hate, and in the very real place of despair.  This unrealistic view offered by Franks, echoed by Mahatma Gandhi,  repeated  by Desmond Tutu, and insisted by Martin Luther King, Jr. –is not only appropriate but necessary if indeed social justice is going to be realizable.  For, if we cannot grant the reality of mistakes, both intended and unintended then we cannot foresee either reparations or renewal.  But how might this apply to you, my dear students, as we come to the end of this course.  How do we model this basic principle of forgiveness and in what ways is it not only just bout also amenable to what we have been doing.

As we noted: this course aims to not only identify but also to objectify social justice principles.  In this way, the course provides the opportunity to practically apply these principles.   The practical application must be not only real but meaningful for those to whom we want to accept, understand, and ultimately utilize these principles.  I can think of no better application of this final principle and lesson in social justice but to relate it to the ultimate outcomes of this course –your grades.  Some of you not only excelled, but also demonstrated and applied the fundamental principles of this course in your activities, projects, journals, and final papers.  Others of you did not.  For that minority there was definite evidence of overreaching, over ambitiousness, and over commitments.  This evidence is seen in hastily completed, sloppy and incomplete journals, rushed and incomplete final projects, and far from exemplary final papers.  The reality is that if conditions of absolute meritocracy were enforced, many of you would be unjustly penalized.  Forgiveness, in academia, allows for such things by providing curves, dropping the last score or resubmissions.  Therefore, I am applying this principle of forgiveness by curving the final grades in this course.  You will note two separate final grades on your grade book –one, on the extreme left reflects the absolute grade, the other, on the extreme right reflects the curved grade.

In closing, I am proud of your accomplishments, and I thank you for the opportunity to guide you in this capstone in social justice.  I know that you will continue to explore it as you pursue your dreams.  Good luck and enjoy yourselves.  You have earned this and more.

Your guide