

## **Confronting global and local social justice issues:**

### **A challenge for educators.**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Changes to societal and political structures have been recommended to prevent the development of a 20:80 society (Martin & Schumann, 1996) which marginalises an increasing number of people. Underlying many of these changes is the education of people so that they are both committed to and capable of participating at a local level in decision making which has an influence on social structures. How can educators assist in promoting an agenda that challenges social structures and values the common good? While being conscious of the potential benefits of globalisation it is important that people are educated to be more aware of and advocates for those who are alienated and excluded from dominant structures.

Australian Catholic University is committed to addressing the challenge of educating people so that they can constructively address the inherent tendency in global structures to overlook their effects on groups who are marginalised. This paper presents a rationale and framework for educating people to operate with a social justice agenda within a global environment. It also presents a case study of a unit which promotes this agenda at university level. The learning processes underlying the unit incorporate a cycle of information, experience, analysis, reflection, and social action. The effects of this unit on students' attitudes, capacity to address social issues and commitment to social action are reported. The implications for educators and for the type of learning culture are explored.

## **CONFRONTING GLOBAL AND LOCAL SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES: A CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATORS.**

*"For all our sakes, we need to work together to build the frameworks of a new global society and economy that respect differences, protect the weak and regulate the strong."*

UNDP Report 1999

### **GLOBAL REALITY AND ISSUES**

Despite popular perceptions of globalisation as a unifying and homogenizing principle we live in a highly stratified society where the rich and powerful easily perpetuate social, economic, political and religious structures which dominate ever increasing numbers of marginalised and alienated people. Addressing a group of educators recently, Robert Fitzgerald, former president of ACOSS, noted that in Australia not only are "the poor becoming poorer but the number of poor is increasing." (Private meeting, 1999). On a global scale the United Nations Development Report 1999 records that "the 200 richest people in the world more than doubled their net worth in the four years to 1998, to \$1 trillion." (UNDP, 1999, p.2)

An image of global civilization represented as a champagne glass can help us to conceptualise the gross inequity of a global society, "in which 20 per cent of humanity, which is the upper part of the glass, controls 83 per cent of the world's riches. And the 20 per cent, who form the stem of the glass, survive with only 1.4 per cent ...". This image was used at the 1995 Social Development Summit in Copenhagen, where there was a strong call for renewed vigour in responding to alternative voices and networks, advocating redefinition of development and a global strategy of solidarity. (Gorostiaga, 1996, p.11). Today, *"the fifth of the world's people living in the highest income countries has 86 per cent of world gross domestic product (GPD)"*. (UNDP, 1999, p.1)

As a counterpoint to this widening rift it has been observed that a new phenomenon of an "almost universal movement toward greater citizen participation and influence" is emerging. (de Oliveira and Tandon, 1994, p.2-3). A growing sense of disillusionment with politics and a "renewal of a sense of common belonging" is perceived to be an impetus towards "spontaneous and committed citizen initiatives premised on love, compassion and concern for others." (de Oliveira and Tandon, 1994, p. 10-11).

### **EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

Premised on the belief that "humanity is in distress but not hopeless" and that "the challenges are formidable but not insurmountable" (Serrano, 1994, p.349), the School of Education of Australian Catholic University actively seeks to build on this notion of committed citizenship by supporting ordinary people in advancing a social justice agenda with respect to the shape of future society.

The traditional organisational, institutional and individual responses and reactions to situations of injustice are to endeavour to 'fix' the problem with some form of intervention. Often this takes the form of projects and programs developed for and imposed upon groups and individuals who are perceived as those 'who cannot help themselves'. This assistance or welfare approach "runs considerable risk of inadvertently strengthening the very forces

responsible for the conditions of suffering and injustice that it seeks to alleviate through its aid." (Korten, 1990, p.109)

Increasingly, globalisation presents challenges and paradoxes in all fields of human life and endeavour. However, rarely are the assumptions and practices of the dominant hegemony questioned. What we have failed to recognise is that there are numerous opportunities to learn from the very people who are struggling to overcome situations of poverty, oppression and exclusion. And then together to apply these learnings in building a more just and equitable global and local society.

## **TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING**

This paper examines the effectiveness of a three phase program of transformative education in which apposite groups explore areas of interpersonal and intercultural dissonance, analyse underlying structures of injustice and conflict and together work towards understanding and acting for social and cultural transformation at personal and communal levels. The purpose of the program is to challenge the preconceived categories, assumptions and attitudes which underly dominant structures of injustice and to promote new paradigms of thinking and acting.

Henry Giroux challenges the traditional role of the university which *"has long been linked to a notion of national identity that is largely defined by and committed to transmitting traditional, Western culture."* (Giroux, 1996, p.45). He advocates learning that draws upon new theoretical models and methodologies which must address the *"culture of exclusion, one which has ignored the multiple narratives, histories and voices of culturally and politically subordinated groups"*. (p.45) Colleges of education are challenged to *"organise courses that broaden students understanding of themselves and others by examining events that evoke a sense of social responsibility and moral accountability."* Educators must be much more than transmitters of existing knowledge. (Giroux, 1991, p.46)

*"The role of the social educator is to break down the hegemony of dominant interests, and to strengthen the legitimacy of popular groups and their capacity to take on those power structures"*. (Arnold, et al, 1991, p.134) Arnold's description underscores the work of education for transformation which demands that educators be outward looking, and that they "take sides". For as Nolan challenges "if (I) do not take sides with the oppressed, then (I) am, albeit unintentionally, taking sides with the oppressor." (Nolan, 1984, p.5)

"Transformative learning refers to learning that is significant to adults' lives. It is learning that pertains to transforming frames of reference." (Mezirow, 1996, p.10) Mezirow defines two dimensions within each individual's frame of reference. The first are the habits of expectation or 'habits of the mind' which shape and may well distort and limit the ways in which we perceive and interpret our world. The second dimension is 'a point of view' or ethnocentricity. This is a particular way we view or judge those who are different to us. (Mezirow, 1996, 12-13).

By getting to know others who are different from us we can quickly begin to change our perceptions and understanding of them. This is a relatively simple process and is a readily observable outcome of learning for transformation.

However, ethnocentricity, which includes values and deeply held beliefs and attitudes, is much more difficult to recognise in oneself and correspondingly difficult to change. The process of immersion in another culture is aimed at creating a critically reflective habit of questioning personal and institutional assumptions, which can then inform "a broader vision

of political commitment an democratic struggle" as part of a "wider discourse of rights and economic equality." (Giroux, 1991, p.53)

Drawing on the notions of social justice, cultural context, power and the skills of empowerment and dialogue found in the discourses of anthropology, education and sociology, (Theophanous, 1993, Giroux et al, 1996, Rees, 1991), facilitators guide participants into a cycle incorporating experience, information, action planning and evaluation grounded in reflection and critical analysis. Facilitators must be "accountable ethically and politically for the stories (the process) produces, the claims it makes on social memories, and the images of the future it deems legitimate." (Giroux, 1991, p.52) Four basic principles of social justice defined by Theophanous (1993, pp.88-100) provide a guide to determining the starting point for an agenda that challenges social structures and values the common good.

Human encounter is pivotal to the process but alone does not create the catalyst for transformation. Exposure to a contrasting culture is intended to impact on participants and to highlight critical issues of social justice and human development about which society has few answers. Listening to people's personal and communal stories of their lived daily experience of suffering and survival, exclusion and resilience is a key element in developing cross-cultural understanding. "*Perhaps the windows of understanding will become more transparent as (we) listen with heart and spirit to the story of these remarkable people.*" (Loller, 1998,p3)

Participants are immersed in the culture and daily life of ordinary people overseas or in an Indigenous Australian rural community. Dialogue with local political, religious and community leaders provides insights into the complexity of perspectives concerning specific issues of conflict, poverty and injustice. All participants, visitors and hosts, are challenged to explore notions of social change at a personal and communal level. Critical analysis and reflection can then lead to action for social change. The outcomes of the process are presented in terms of participants' responses and ongoing commitment to social action. Educators who have participated in the process are enthusiastic in their responses to promoting an agenda that challenges systemic injustice, and from an informed position can encourage and enable their students and the wider community to participate in local decision making influencing social structures.

## **RATIONALE**

The School of Education of Australian Catholic University is challenging educators to articulate new ways of seeing, thinking and acting. ACU acknowledges that the theory and practice of social change must be examined and interpreted in the light of the context of those who are excluded and alienated. The University is committed to addressing the challenge of educating people so that they can constructively address global and local situations and underlying structures which alienate and exclude people from essential structures, processes and benefits. Responding to the challenges presented through the encounter of cultures, the blurring of national and international borders, and the inequalities of wealth and political power (Ibrahim, 1998, pp.7-10) requires courage and commitment to solutions based on human need and respect for human dignity. There is no escaping the globalized character of human problems and the need for citizen participation at individual, local and global levels. (Camilleri, 1998,p.7-90, Fernandes, 1998, pp.347-376) At the local level ACU has a particular commitment to social justice education and action, to the processes of reconciliation and to advocating the rights and particular needs of Indigenous Australians and young people.

At a societal level well-intentioned policies and legislation may produce change, however, their focus on obvious symptoms of discord or disadvantage produce(s) short-term benefit but long-term malaise, and foster(s) the need for still more symptomatic interventions." (Senge, 1992, p.15). The often 'taken for granted' assumptions and beliefs that produce behaviours contributing to unjust structures are inextricably tied to ways in which people think. (Senge, 1992, p.53). Therefore, creating a fundamental shift in values, attitudes and actions to promote social change and a new vision of a more just society is the primary purpose of an innovative unit which was initiated two years ago by the School of Education of Australian Catholic University, in partnership with the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education.

## **THE PROGRAM**

"Guided by a fundamental concern for justice and equity, and for the dignity of all human beings", (ACU Handbook, 1999) ACU offers students, and also educators and community leaders, the opportunity to participate in a program of cultural exposure and immersion in selected local or international communities. By developing understanding and empathy across barriers of ideology, ethnicity, race and conflict, it is possible to begin a synergy of theory and practice which can 'make a difference' in each person's sphere of influence.

The program is premised on the notion that direct cultural encounters coupled with processes of dialogue can build human relationships across the divides of ethnicity, race and religion. Four broad objectives undergird the program. These are:

- Promoting social transformation by addressing underlying structures of justice and human development issues in personal, community and organisational contexts
- Developing skills of critical social analysis
- Fostering dialogue and reflection towards understanding and building human relationships
- Facilitating practical social action at grass roots level in participants' own personal and professional contexts.

The process explicitly engages participants in the social and ethical dimensions of disadvantage, alienation and conflict. These are examined within a framework of community development and principles of human rights. Conflict management, ongoing processes of reconciliation and complementarity are bridges which can lead to personal and social changes promoting peaceful coexistence and acceptance of enriching diversity among groups and individuals.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Participants were selected through an interview process. A written submission was required. This laid the foundation for beginning a journey in which personal sustained commitment is essential for positive outcomes. An initial selection criteria was the applicant's willingness to commit to a year of social action on their return to their home and community. Interviews took place in the month prior to the first group meetings. Background briefing and building frameworks for personal, historical and cultural understandings took place in a series of seminars and workshops, over a three month period to allow time for participants to begin integrating new knowledge and understanding

Participants ranged from students in the initial stages of their professional education to those who have had more than 30 years experience as educators and community leaders. They included a range of people from Indigenous and other Australian groups.

A limit was set of six to ten people in each group. The reason is twofold:

- a. group cohesiveness is better facilitated and
- b. the impact on local hosts and environment is minimized and in many instances allows for one on one communication.

For the purposes of this study a sample of programs conducted in three overseas locations and one local Australian location were selected

Data was collated from the four programs to provide a cross-sectional sample. Journals kept by facilitators and participants, audio, video and written records of interviews with hosts and participants, and informal observations collected by participant/observers were all rich sources of data.

A process of reflection and an evaluative process with participants was used to analyse effectiveness and determine future direction and implications for action.

## DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION ON THE PROCESS

- Phase one

Preliminary group meetings involved participants in reflection on a series of background readings, and enabled new relationships to develop. Focussing on emancipatory social transformation, (Foley, 1995. P.13), a framework was created for a methodology of experiential and problem based learning. Critical analysis and reflection throughout "involve(d) calling into question the assumptions underlying customary, habitual ways of thinking." (Brookfield, 1987, p.1) and skilling participants in communication, dialogue, deep listening and networking. Participants were asked to 'unpack' those values which contribute to their own perceptions of injustice and issues of conflict and human development. This critiquing process was carried through from the local context to the global.

The preparatory seminars and workshops were conducted in the participants' own contexts and developed in consultation and planning with host educators, advisers and community leaders. Briefing on the background of issues of justice and conflict, as well as the selected country's history and culture, laid the foundation for a more informed entry and appropriate questioning of hosts. Selected readings highlighted useful concepts and provided theoretical discussion and case studies concerning broader social, political and human development issues.

Growing awareness of personal assumptions and stereotypes is the beginning of a journey into the spaces between categories and boundaries. A participant reflected that "*I began my path into education for social transformation in the naïve belief that I would be wise and knowledgeable enough to "help". What has been challenged is the myth of my own impartiality.*" (Loller, 1998,p.6) Problem solving and simulations stimulated discussion and reflection, and facilitated critical social analysis of particular issues.

Personal anxieties and fears began to emerge particularly for first time travellers. However, "*Discomfort is, for better or worse, an integral part of social change education. It occurs when questions of social identity, oppression and action have an impact on a personal level.*"(Arnold, et al, 1991, p.137) The realisation that we would be 'outsiders' who would be in the minority created varying degrees of apprehension. Concerns arose about "*revealing my own lack of knowledge*" or "*that my views will offend people*". One older participant wondered whether she had "*a place here*". However, most participants expressed positive anticipation: Some commented we are "*expectant for what we can achieve*" and "*feel as*

*though (we) want to get more involved and find out more and do more."* (Let's Talk, 1997, p.7)

- Phase two

The field experiences were of 8 to 16 days duration. Locations have included Ireland and Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine, Vietnam and rural areas of Northern New South Wales.

Participants experienced different worlds of meaning in different contexts by travelling to their selected location where they were exposed to situations of injustice, poverty and particularly conflict. Participants were moved towards a space 'between borders' where their own social categories and perceptions of reality were immediately questioned in the light of others' existential reality.

One participant's deep realisation of her helplessness to change or 'fix' the situation of intractable conflict and oppression in Palestine is a sure sign of the deep transformation that can occur as people travel into others' worlds. *"The dilemma is that I am not, and never will be, part of the lived existence of Maria and her people, and therefore whatever I say is essentially meaningless to them. I must wait at the edges."*(Loller, 1998, p.1) Her recognition of herself as simply a sojourner opened her to the possibility of further transformation as she *"waited hesitantly on the unfamiliar threshold of undeciphered worlds of meaning."*(Loller, 1998, p.1)

Creating experiences that 'jolt' and allowing participants to experience their own vulnerability and powerlessness was intended to provide a catalyst towards the transformative process.(Evans et al, 1987, Morris, 1993, Mezirow, 1995) The aim was to begin a fundamental shift in values, attitudes and actions which could foster social change. Meeting with local people provided an environment for comparative learning and for making connections with the Australian context. An Irish participant commented, *"I have learned about the conflict in Australia. It is, in some ways, very similar to Northern Ireland."* (Let's Talk, 1998, p.7). By meeting with people in their own communities, participants experienced the fundamental importance of communicating through listening and of appreciating others' perspectives.

As guests of local families participants shared the daily struggles and celebrations, narratives and way of life of the people. The intense experience of involvement in the daily issues surrounding points of conflict, differing perspectives of memory and history, was expressed by a participant in the Israel/Palestine immersion this year.

*"We journeyed to the edges of the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts and also were invited into the lives and homes of ordinary people. This had the most singularly powerful effect. ... In the ordinariness of daily life and through our hosts' candid questioning we began to recognise hitherto hidden points of conflict in our own personal and national life."* (Just Thinking, 1999, p.2)

Coping with unfamiliar cultural and social traditions provided a range of rich and often disconcerting challenges. A young Aboriginal woman reflected,

*"... looking at somebody else's situation helped me to realise the importance of my culture and people. It is strange that I had to sit in a foreign land to understand something that I had witnessed 4 years ago. I saw the grief of an old man over the loss of his family, his culture and his identity and sitting within the stone walls of an Irish Castle I finally cried for I realised that his loss was also my loss."*

Equally significant was her realisation that, *"Lessons can be learned in the most unusual places and sometimes from the most unusual sources. I was privileged to find not only a global perspective but an inner perspective of situations that I have faced all my life. I see now that we all should learn from our past, embrace it and grow from it - not dwell in it. The past should not be ignored and thus reconciliation is very important ... we should approach the future side by side to work for co-existence together."*(Let's Talk, 1998, p.7)

Again discussion, reflection and critical social analysis formed the basis of processing new experiences and provided opportunities for essential regular debriefing. Sharing of each others stories and living in the homes of host families was a powerful catalyst for building understanding relationships.

- Phase three

Re-entry into the home environment began the third phase - a time of reflection and action planning. Practical, and more importantly meaningful, action strategies for applying new knowledge, skills and attitudes continue to be planned and facilitated through debriefing and evaluation sessions.

## **OUTCOMES**

Since their return, participants have had several meetings. All have expressed their need for continuing contact, and further regular meetings will be arranged by the groups as they require for organisation of action strategies and ongoing support.

During this re-entry into the home context there has been a specific emphasis on 'making the connections'. Reflecting on how new skills, knowledge and insights may be applied to situations of injustice, disadvantage and oppression in participants' own context has engaged their energies in action for change. A teacher expressed her hope, *"I want to raise children's awareness. I would like them to be able to see outside of their own world ... I would like to inspire an interest in children - for them to ... find their own path where they can help others see the rest of the world and its people in a different light."* (Vietnam, 1999)

A group of Sydney teachers have worked to form a "Schools for Social Justice Network" in their area. Students and others have committed time to speaking engagements and are becoming active supporters of local social justice initiatives.

Facilitating workshops and seminars for Australian school students and staff, and coordinating exposure programs that take them to Indigenous communities in NW New South Wales is the outcome of the dedication and commitment of a small group of post and under graduates. The interaction and building of relationships between Indigenous and non-indigenous people is a highly successful contribution to the furthering of the Reconciliation process.

Another undergraduate is now seeking ways in which she can promote communication with and support for university students in the occupied territory of the West Bank in Palestine.

Reciprocal visits from two Irish/Northern Irish/British groups have proved immensely valuable in facilitating dialogue and ongoing relationships with rural Indigenous communities. Continued contact with the host communities is encouraged and in this way the sense of global interdependence is further reinforced.

## CONCLUSION

The model has proved its effectiveness as a generic process that is readily adaptable to diverse local or international contexts and situations. Because participants' own experience is the starting point for learning, their observations, reflections and reactions throughout the process are a natural ongoing resource for informing future practice. Reflecting on experience and examining personal learnings is the beginning of a journey which seeks to bring theory and experience together in both the personal and professional domains.

There are no absolute answers to the questions which continue to emerge, but teachers and educators have reflected that they are now more open to the challenge of making the connections between themselves and those who are excluded, between their own lifestyles and poverty, and the structures that impoverish and oppress. Ongoing rethinking of basic assumptions, critical analysis of justice issues and consistent action require an energy that is difficult yet possible to sustain. Educators can become powerful and effective interpreters of global realities.

Establishing a learning culture which is premised on principles of justice and building of human relations is the major desired outcome however its impact can only be measured over time. It cannot be assumed that all change necessarily represents a positive and balanced response. Systemic changes are problematic to measure even though there have been early indications of potential change as participants commit to greater involvement at the levels of policy and decision making. Further research is required to assess the long term effects of the process.

The positive outcomes of the programs are striking in their intensity and potential for ongoing effectiveness, however, no one program or model of education is able to address the complexity of renewing and reshaping that is needed to create an environment or context in which peaceful coexistence and equitable distribution of resources is a reality. What we have presented here is one way of beginning to make a difference.

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