Review Essay

Student Development and Social Justice: Critical Learning, Radical Healing, and Community Engagement

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Tessa Hicks Peterson's new book, *Student Development and Social Justice: Critical Learning, Radical Healing, and Community Engagement*, is a must-read for anyone who wishes to involve college students in community-based coursework grounded in social justice. The integration of theoretical analysis with practical application to create a truly holistic vision of transformative engagement in community sets this volume apart from other books about community-based learning. Moving beyond the discussion of "service projects" as mutually beneficial to both students and community, Hicks Peterson illustrates, through the lens of social justice pedagogy, how building truly reciprocal partnerships must entail deep self-reflection, challenging dominant narratives, and radical healing to cultivate hope for a better world.

As such, while this volume is appropriate reading for higher education faculty or staff who seek to integrate community partnerships into their courses in ways that benefit both students and community members, its practical guidelines, specific case studies, personal stories from the author, and philosophical tenets are also applicable to the work of those outside the academy who are involved in building community partnerships. The language is accessible, and the feminist, anti-oppressive frameworks upon which the book draws are relevant (and timely) both inside and outside the academy, and for inveterate or novice community-engaged scholars.

The book's integration of individual transformation with more collective/structural societal change is one of the most valuable aspects of the work. By locating her pedagogy in social change activism and theory, Hicks Peterson underscores the importance of ensuring that students in community engagement projects understand the larger forces that create oppression, and, most importantly, she

posits that in a college classroom, reflection, critical consciousness, and healing happen on an individual level. Thus, the model and the examples she offers throughout the book illustrate a process that addresses both levels – the societal and the personal – through which students may experience a deeply transformative experience and cultivate tools that will serve them in community-building and social change work well beyond the end of the semester.

The first four chapters of the book focus on theories of community engagement, which include key concepts and activities. This part of the book also includes "critical reflection activities" for the reader, some of which could also be useful for student journaling or group activities. The latter part of the book, which focuses on praxis, includes syllabi, activities, community partnership and learning outcomes, assessment, and examples of institutional-level changes that may foster transformative community engagement initiatives. It also offers a series of useful activities that may be aligned with each stage of a four-step model drawn from the work of Bryan Stevenson that describes how to engage in both individual and collective transformation of injustice. This section also includes excerpts from student reflections, so that readers can see how students understood and responded to the experiences.

The four-step framework is supplemented by indigenous knowledges, social justice activism, asset-based community development, and feminist pedagogy, along with Hicks Peterson's own teaching and activist experience. Step 1, *becoming proximate*, invites students to connect with the communities with which they work. This process means not seeing them as others to be "saved" but rather as active agents who are already working to better their lives. The perspectives of those marginalized communities thus become centered; because they

live the closest to particular issues of injustice, they have insights into and knowledge of their needs that are critical to transforming that injustice. Students then are invited to examine their own positionalities in relation to both the marginalized communities and to the particular issues.

Once students become proximate to social issues and the communities most affected by them, the next step, *shifting the narrative*, is almost inevitable. As many college students gain their information from dominant news sources, their understanding is often shaped by institutions of oppression. The communities with which they work in these types of college projects usually tell very different stories, creating a gap that provokes a dissonance and a critical rethinking. Sociology, social justice, and critical pedagogy all provide frames on which Hicks Peterson draws to help students actively dismantle those dominant narratives and understand what it is they perpetuate.

As they do so, students almost inevitably *become uncomfortable*, which is the third step in Stevenson's model. As dominant narratives are dismantled, many students' assumptions, beliefs, and values – about themselves, the communities with which they work, and the issues at hand – are often deeply unsettled. The community engagement practices and theories on which Hicks Peterson draws provide a useful foundation for students to learn to sit with that discomfort and come to a “critical consciousness.” Mindfulness practices along with healing justice models offer useful tips for helping students navigate this discomfort and recognize how individuals may have different reactions based on their different identities.

Finally, because the first three parts of the framework can be overwhelming, the last component of the model is *cultivating hope*. The community engagement initiatives discussed in the book help students develop a radical vision that is grounded in hope. This also is where indigenous and feminist knowledges about transformative ways of creating a more just world become so useful. The stories, practices, case studies, and accessible language make it a useful guide for a variety of audiences; one does not have to be heavily grounded in aca-

demie theory to be deeply enriched by this book.

As Assistant Vice President for Community Engagement and Assistant Professor of Urban Studies at Pitzer College, Hicks Peterson is uniquely situated to write this book due to her footing in both student development and the academic side of higher education, in both community activism work and in scholarship. Indeed, she shares some of her journey with readers, locating herself in relation to the content and offering the lessons she has learned. As she offers tips and advice, Hicks Peterson highlights the case study of the course she taught at Pitzer College, “Healing Ourselves, Healing Our Communities,” along with her other community partnership experiences.

This book is a deeply insightful and highly practical holistic articulation of how community engagement and social justice are – and need to be – inherently intertwined. Hicks Peterson articulates an insightful model of social justice community engagement while offering practical tools: syllabi, classroom activities, and recommendations for institutions, along with stories from the field. She offers teachers, students, staff members, and community members tangible ways to engage in community work that seeks to fundamentally transform injustice. By bringing together elements from the fields of healing justice, student development, sociology, social justice, and transformative, feminist, and critical pedagogy, Hicks Peterson weaves a practical guide for how to foster community engagement initiatives that empower both students and community members.

Author

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