

A Dartmouth Pedagogy

By Benjamin Bolger '04

Critical literacy and learning skills are the foundation to self-liberation and the key to building sustainable learning-orientated communities. In the impoverished regions of the world, educator and activist Paulo Freire in Pedagogy of the Oppressed advocated a controversial nexus of empowerment between teachers and students.¹ Provocatively, he emphasized the value of a system of learning where all participants thoughtfully coexist in the production, exchange, and reflection of knowledge within the context of a supportive community. The American education critic Jonathan Kozol in Savage Inequalities discusses how American's education system is, in many parts of our country, analogous to developing countries in terms of teacher resources, student safety, social stratification, economic inequality, and future job opportunities.² Freire and Kozol record the daunting challenges that exist in education, but both authors offer optimism that dedicated teachers can make a meaningful difference; so long as they remain inspired, realistic, and aware of the macro-level problems that confront their students.

My empowerment-oriented teaching career reflects this humanistic desire to build effective learning and conflict resolution communities for disadvantaged groups within the United States and abroad. Because I am interested in expanding my capacity to effect change within these groups, I chose to participate in the concentrated and creative scholarly MALS community at Dartmouth College. My study at Dartmouth provided me with a thoughtful interdisciplinary program that helped me build a



more creative and critical understanding of social, political, economic, and cultural problems that confront the United States and other parts of our world. This article details my academic voyage and how the MALS program helped to change some of the paradigms of my thought.

Unconventional Experiences

My personal narrative is useful in understanding the development of my career interests in emancipatory pedagogy. My unconventional journey began at a young age when I was homeschooled by my mother as a strategy for avoiding the educational poverty that surrounded my Midwestern Rustbelt community. My homeschooling environment ignited a voracious appetite for experiential and equitable (non-hierarchical) learning that catapulted me forward in my studies. By age 13, I began college study in Michigan. Having traveled before college and observed many significant inequities, I was attracted to re-

search investigating social stratification, racial discrimination, and social inequalities. In time, given my interests, I found sociology to be a fulfilling undergraduate major at The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. In the end, I earned my A.B. with Highest Distinction, Phi Beta Kappa, and a perfect 4.0 grade point average. I graduated as a James B Angell Scholar.

Growing up in the shadows of the industrially-bankrupted city of Flint, Michigan, my pragmatic resolve to combine scholarship with an actionable social agenda led to my early political involvement within the decaying fibers of America's rustbelt. After graduating from the University of Michigan, I set my sights on working within the national political system. As a result, my political journey took me to Washington, D.C. As a young Washington prole, I found myself working with Mike McCurry in the White House Press Office. Given this exceptional opportunity, I rapidly developed an acute appreciation for the entangled process of policy development, political triangulation, and partisan negotiations. My time spent in the West Wing

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helped me to obtain an unedited political education on how the national media and

the executive branch interact. In particular, I learned how partisan conflicts were resolved by the use of the mass media and other communication channels. In this context, I learned to appreciate the art of public speaking and the need for effective, frank communication with public audiences.

While I was supportive of the Democratic party's national agenda, I grew increasingly disappointed with Washington's general ineffectiveness in resolving complex conflicts that concern the poor and marginalized minority groups. In particular, Washington is filled with too many narrow policy "solutions" that fail to recognize the complex interconnected origins of many social and economic problems. My political experiences in Washington made me desire an advanced graduate level education that would help me to better understand the social problems that disturbed me. Having secured admission to Yale Law School at age 19, I expected a career in law school to hold promise. However, in the final analysis, I was too young for law school. After deep reflection, I decided to seek out my real passion for graduate study in sociology and politics.

I moved to England in search of an education system that required focused thought and careful self-motivation. My studies at the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge supported this goal; I concurrently studied at Oxford and Cambridge and lived in England for a total of three years. At Oxford, I secured a depth of specialization in analyzing social stratification and political sociology; and at Cambridge I acquired a rigorous understanding of liberal democratic theories involved in politics. My British studies provided me with an excellent learning experience. I completed a M.Sc. in Sociology at Oxford and a M.Phil. in Sociology and Politics of Modern Society at Cambridge. Due to my accomplishments at Oxford, I was admitted and encouraged to complete a

D.Phil. in sociology. However, my graduate studies in sociology and politics implored me to consider how I could best become an effective advocate for disadvantaged communities, such as the ones that I had grown up with in the Midwest.

Because my career goals evolved toward the applied practice of my graduate studies, I returned to the United States and completed an interdisciplinary graduate degree at Stanford University's School of Education. I used my graduate studies at Stanford to focus on the praxis of education advocacy for disempowered com-

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munities. Given my aim, I took advocacy-orientated courses from the Graduate School of Business, the Law School, and the School of Education at Stanford. My Stanford education helped me to realize that teachers have the sincere capacity to challenge a number of serious social problems in disadvantaged communities.

Building upon my intense and personal educational journey, I sought to earnestly adhere to Paulo Freire's notion that one is charged with a greater responsibility after acquiring a "privileged" education. After graduating from Stanford, I moved to New York City. I wasted no time in leveraging my education's social value by teaching underprivileged populations. After a year of college teaching in New York, I moved to Boston where I have been teaching for the past four years.

Over the past half decade, I have carved out a unique career of college instruction that has emphasized working with diverse and disadvantaged student communities ranging from ESL and non-

traditional students to learning disabled Ivy League undergraduates. For example, I have taught basic English and writing skills classes at Bunker Hill Community College. Many of my students have gone on to successfully gain their United States citizenship, find better-paying jobs, and start their own community empowerment initiatives. On the other side of the tracks, I have worked with Harvard faculty, such as William Julius Wilson, Stanley Hoffman, Sidney Verba, and Robert Putnam. I have served as a Teaching Fellow at Harvard for four years. The courses that I have been involved with at Harvard include "Race, Class and Poverty in Urban America," "Representation, Equality, and Democracy," "The American Presidency," "Ethics and International Relations," "American Foreign Policy," "Mass Culture in Nazi Germany: The Power of Images and Illusions" (a course that discussed how the media and propaganda problematically supported a scheme of malevolence and fascism), and "American Democracy."

My desire to work with diverse student populations has been truly interdisciplinary. In the past five years, I have taught at Queens College, Baruch College, the Pratt Institute, Suffolk University, Emerson College, the University of Massachusetts, Quincy College, Boston University, Boston College, Northeastern University, Emmanuel College, and Bunker Hill Community College. This collage of visiting professorships, adjunct faculty positions, and teaching fellowships that I have held has allowed me to interact with many underprivileged students in diverse classrooms. While my teaching ventures have been extraordinarily diverse, I have consistently attempted to engage my students with creative and analytical thought, exposing them to a careful reading of historical and contemporary literature, and helping to guide their skills in mediating conflicts in their communities using critical pedagogy as a basis for providing enlightenment; a method that Paulo Freire urged in his own years of teaching and activism.

(Bolger continued on page 28)

(Bolger continued from page 24)

Social activism can take many constructive expressions. Using my experiences in the classroom as the basis for observations about social class conflict, economic inequity, and social injustice, I have presented my research papers on social conflict and educational inequalities at the American Sociological Association for three concurrent years. In Michigan, I have served as a member of the State of Michigan Commission on Death and Dying. This commission was authorized to review the medical, ethical, social, and legal implications of doctor-assisted aid-in-dying in the State of Michigan. The Commission was created by Governor John Engler and the Michigan legislature to investigate issues arising out of Dr. Jack Kevorkian's controversial activities. Back in Boston, recognizing that we need more ethics in our corporate sector, I have served as a member of Harvard's Advisory Board on Shareholder Responsibility, where Harvard's multi-billion dollar investments and shareholder proxy votes are reviewed in terms of ethical concerns. On a related theme of socially responsible investing, I have been an invited speaker at the Green Mountain Summit on Investor Responsibility and I have spoken at the Institutional Investor Summit on Climate Risk at the United Nations.

Continuing to be an active and engaged student of social activism, I have remained an apprentice of knowledge myself. After completing my studies at Stanford, I have continued to maintain a connection to learning in the university environment. In New York, I completed graduate degrees at Columbia (M.S. in Real Estate Development) and Teachers College (M.A. in the Politics of Education). While in the radius of Boston, I benefitted from graduate study at Harvard (M.Des.S. in Real Estate and Urban Planning), Brown (M.A. in Development Studies), and Boston College (M.A. in Higher Education), and, of course, Dartmouth (MA in Liberal Studies). These academic endeavors have complimented my earlier scholarly explorations at Michigan, Oxford, Cambridge, and Stan-

ford; and underscore my sincere interest in lifetime learning. Indeed, I see a quality education as a process of learning how to ask better, probing questions.

Dartmouth: An Intellectual Capital

To be sure, I have enjoyed a Jeffersonian-style education, marked with unique multi-disciplinary experiences. My Dartmouth education provided me with a critical synthesis of these diverse areas. In fact, the MALS pedagogy helped to unite divergent scholarly categories of interest into an interdisciplinary symbiosis of scholarship and learning. The value of having two faculty members, from different academic departments, lead a focused seminar involving generous opportunities for dialogue between all participants is an important example of the brave pedagogy that is an asset of the MALS program. The excellent thematic summer symposiums and dinner discussions with the guest presenters is representative of this incomparable Dartmouth graduate school experience. The flexibility of summer semester study at Dartmouth is another powerful advantage of the program. In my case, I studied in Hanover for the summers between 1999 to 2003, culminating in my 2004 graduation. Now, as an Alumnus of the MALS program, I continue to remain in contact with faculty members and students who mentored and challenged my thinking on a number of complex social problems. Thus, my fondness for Dartmouth continues to grow with time. Indeed, Dartmouth inspires me to be a better teacher.

While there is more to my life's narrative in terms of my educational background, experience, and goals, I hope that I have effectively explained the origins of my passion for teaching and working with students from diverse backgrounds. I sincerely value the intellectual resources of the Dartmouth MALS program, the specialized and interdisciplinary course offerings, diverse faculty interests, the small cohort size of the MA program, and the extraordinary backgrounds of many of the students. My participation in the program helped

navigate me forward in my teaching career. In many ways, the balance of personal and professional experiences of MALS students and faculty members reinvigorates the intimate academic community in a way that would have pleased Paulo Freire.

In the final analysis, my exposure to the world of politics, my interdisciplinary academic background, and my personal history of living around an impoverished Midwest rustbelt town has fostered my passion for seeking to resolve the problems of conflict and promoting the ideals of coexistence. Clearly, my azygous life history contributes to my career goals of building understanding between diverse communities. I continue to believe that one teacher can make a difference. My work in higher education is aimed at squarely addressing some of the unresolved educational inequities that I have witnessed. The Dartmouth pedagogy that I have experienced has been invaluable in providing sustenance for my life goals. At present, I am serving on the Dartmouth MALS Alumni Council. This is one way that I hope to express my ongoing gratitude to Dartmouth College for the powerful and productive learning experience that occurred in Hanover. It is my hope that Dartmouth will continue to foster innovative and bold learning communities.

¹Freire, Paulo. 1970. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: The Seabury Press.

²Kozol, Jonathan. 1992. Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools. New York: Perennial.

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