



Social Activism in Teacher Education: A New Model for Activist Learning

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Abstract

Educators should be --first and foremost-- involved citizens and, hence, they should be aware of social issues and have a clear political stance (Apple, 2013). To this end, they must be familiar with various social issues, among them inequality and the struggle for social justice, exclusion and silencing of particular groups, racism, multiculturalism, gender issues, and environmental sustainability. Based on this approach, in 2007, Seminar Hakibbutzim College, the largest teacher-education college in Israel, added a module to the requirements for earning a teaching certificate, namely, the Social Activism Program, which aims to increase the political awareness and the social involvement of the college's future graduates (Yogev & Michaeli, 2009).

A fundamental feature of this program is the combination of academic coursework and field experience in community-based social involvement. The academic courses provide the theoretical and conceptual framework regarding issues related to critical thinking, whereas the community-based activity takes the form of active involvement in one of the many and varied volunteer frameworks to which students can be referred. The program set out to accomplish an additional goal, namely, to help faculty members design teaching and learning methods that transcend the walls of the classroom and college and encompass the entire Israeli social reality. Thus, learning takes place at the site of social activity and in the educational frameworks to which the children belong, as well as in the children's homes and other locations in the relevant communities.

The insights we present here are based on having taught this program to thousands of teacher-trainees over the years, and on our collaboration with hundreds of organizations for social change and state-funded welfare institutions. In addition, the program's efficacy was evaluated several times, in order to better understand the challenges ahead (Yogev & Michaeli, 2011). The program serves as a model, because it merges academics with fieldwork and integrates theory with practice, an approach that is of utmost importance and necessity in the realm of teacher education. The program provides an innovative way to learn about social issues and conflicts and gives new meaning to the students' volunteer work.

Keywords: *Teacher education, social activism, political education, critical pedagogy*

Introduction

Throughout the world, and in recent years in Israel as well, the academy has been developing its "third role": in addition to teaching and research, there has been an increase in social and community involvement (Israeli Council for Higher Education, 2013, World Bank, 2017²). Over the past decade, social activism has been integrated as a hands-on activity that is recognized for academic credit and is a curricular requirement in the teacher-education program taught at Seminar Hakibbutzim College.

An academic unit was established by the college management to oversee this module, which consists of a yearly or a semester-long course, which involves 60 hours (per academic year) of practical work that takes place outside of the college boundaries, in any one of a large variety of social and community frameworks. We refer to this module as "learning social activism", i.e., a framework in which learning encompasses both theory and practice, the development of social awareness and activism, by means of class discussions, and educational encounters that take place beyond the classroom parameters.

In this short article, I will briefly outline the framework in which this learning process takes place, and will address the following questions: what is unique about social activism as part of teacher education as compared to its implementation in other academic disciplines? And how is this activity different from the classic pedagogic guidance that accompanies students during their teacher-education practicum?

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² <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/tertiaryeducation>



The Changing Face of the Academy

The sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman used the metaphor "fluid modernity" to refer to the current historical period (Bauman, 2000). In the past, modernism was considered solid, secure, and predictable, whereas in its latest manifestation, in the era of post-Postmodernism, the social structures and establishments that surrounded us have become fluid in form and content as they undergo rapid changes. Among these changing establishments are the family, the job market, the community and, of course, the education system.

Indeed, the building blocks of the world of education are also changing. Thus, for example, knowledge itself, which in the past could be bound within the volumes of an encyclopedia, has changed in nature: knowledge is now subject to interpretation and argument, viewed as dynamic, responsive, and reflective. Just like the principle underlying the concept of Wikipedia, in which the readers are also the writers, so too the academy is no longer perceived as the utmost authority, but rather is required to formulate its content in accordance with the nature, needs, and resources of the community to which it belongs.

In the context of education, this means that while the academy provides education in the field (in schools, kindergartens, and in the community in general), it also learns a great deal from interacting with the community. In other words, the campus and the classroom are only a few of the sites where learning takes place. In the current Zeitgeist, not only the students, but also the books are subject to constant critique. The mission with which the academy is faced in this era is not only to educate students, but also to prepare them to be citizens capable of exercising independent thinking and demonstrating activism and initiative, as they interpret reality and act within it.

The New Profile of the Students

The students who nowadays are beginning their academic education are members of the Y generation, who have a realistic view of the future job market as well as an understanding of their power and status as consumers in various aspects of their lives, including in their academic pursuits. Raised on a diet of doubt and skepticism, this generation uses the same approach to observe and analyze the world of academic education which it has recently entered.

In every discipline and in every stage of their studies, including in the teacher-education program, students are querying us: "What is the point?" For example, what is the justification for studying theory? They desire more hands-on activity and less theory, more "experiencing of" than "talking about." As educators, we may choose to be critical of their attitude, or we can simply walk into the classroom and admit that this is the state of affairs in our current reality. Of course, I am not suggesting that the study of theory be cast aside -- I continue to teach theory in my classes; however, the teaching of theory requires a different approach, one that combines practice.

If we reflect on the tremendous change taking place in terms of the student profile, we may recognize this as a unique opportunity for us to refresh our teaching paradigms, vary our methodologies, and transcend the boundaries of the classroom by making the challenging reality towards which our students are headed part of the educational arena. Thus, we may leverage students' expectations to hone our skills as educators.

The Changing Face of the Community

When we think of community, various images come to mind. Many times, we think of expressions such as "reaching out to the community" or "diving into the field," expressions which convey a certain power structure. Presumably, the intellectual academics descend from the ivory tower to share their gift of knowledge with the plebeians in the field. However, in this day and age, communities are as numerous as they are varied and essentially serve as a framework to which their members can belong.

The important aspect in terms of learning activism is to view the community as a site for mutual learning and interaction, a place where we come to teach and learn. If we view this social interaction as the modeling of teaching, then the community in which the student becomes socially involved can be likened to the classroom or kindergarten. This is a site where active learning takes place in conditions of uncertainty, requiring an inquisitive --rather than a cautious-- approach, observation -- rather than labeling.



Transitioning from Critical Theory to Social Activism in Education

In the following section, I present some of the principles for learning activism. To this end, I will focus on three components.

First, this mission recognizes the processes of change that society and the academy are undergoing, as well as the fluidity of knowledge and of the educational reality encountered by faculty members and students alike (Bauman, 2000). This is the basis for this integrative approach. Consequently, a large portion of the activity for social involvement does not take place through teaching in schools, but rather through counseling and mentoring in social and community-based organizations affiliated with the third sector and informal educational frameworks, which work with children during after-school hours. Through these organizations, the students are afforded an opportunity to take a closer look at and gain a deeper understanding of the environment in which their future pupils are being raised, while learning about the complexity of Israeli society.

Second, this process requires a constant and repetitive to-and-fro movement, from the classroom into the community and back again, based on an underlying understanding that the classroom provides only a limited arena in which to develop social awareness. Students cannot acquire all of the skills and tools they will need if their learning is limited by classroom boundaries, nor can practical experience alone suffice. It is the to-and-fro movement that helps them develop the necessary social and educational awareness. The awareness that is gained by moving between the two arenas creates the spark for learning alternative ways of thinking and developing reflective and critical observation, which in turn give rise to social and political activism. Students observe their reality and ask themselves why it is the way it is. This type of critical observation is directed outward, towards the community, but also inward, leading to personal development and growth. College courses that integrate the learning of activism also engage in group dynamics and reflective activities. Students practice and acquire skills that serve also for examining their own values and principles, as they encounter various complex issues in their field experience.

Finally, this process not only prepares student-teachers for their future work, but also enables them to formulate **practical-theoretical conceptualizations** that help them describe all that they have experienced through their eyes, ears and hearts. To enable future teachers to adopt a discourse that is not only psychological and emotional, but also propels them to take action, they need to acquire an appropriate language and terminology. Kurt Lewin coined the expression "There's nothing so practical as good theory," and indeed, the ability of future teachers to frame what they see in conceptual and theoretical terms will most certainly prove to be one of the most important instruments they acquire.

Student-teachers who became involved in social organizations in partial fulfillment of the required practicum module were exposed to the activities and dilemmas encountered by weak and marginalized segments of Israeli society. As a result, they gained a comprehensive understanding of the society in which they are to become active educators. Students who have gained this additional understanding will be teachers who recognize the need not only to identify a student's academic strengths and weaknesses, but also to learn about the individual's socioeconomic background, living environment, and after-school routine. Understanding these factors can help teachers guide their students to succeed academically.

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