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Challenging Traditional Boundaries in a Community Studies Course

The University of South Florida is searching for ways to redefine itself by challenging the traditional boundaries between research and teaching. With this in mind, we created a community studies course that confronts many of the dichotomies found in the university. Through the study of a neighborhood undergoing dramatic change, we implemented nontraditional teaching methods to create a dynamic course that affected the way students understand the city in which they live and also enhanced their intellectual development.

The University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa is at a crossroads. It has experienced phenomenal growth, both in size and in stature, since it first began admitting students in 1960. With more than 36,000 students, it is now the eighteenth largest university in the United States. Recently the Florida State University System recognized USF as a "Tier I" research university, and it is now striving for national recognition as a research institution. We believe that our university, facing important questions about what kind of institution it will become, is at a significant juncture in its development.

Barbara Holland argues that "many institutions have pressed to move up the Carnegie classification ladder by emulating the missions, values, and behavior of a few elite institutions" (Holland, 1999, p. 51). The metaphor most often used to describe this traditional, one-size-fits-all model is the stool with three legs—representing research, teaching, and service. While the metaphorical legs of the stool are equal in theory, in practice the strength of each leg is often unbalanced. Generally, nationally ranked research institutions emphasize research, liberal arts colleges emphasize teaching, and community colleges emphasize service. Holland proposes that each university forge its own path: one that reflects its unique strengths and opportunities, benefiting all stakeholders—faculty, students and society—simultaneously. According to this model, research is not pitted against teaching or service; these three strands of a university's mission are creatively intertwined. This is the engaged university.

As administrators, researchers, and teachers at the University of South Florida, we recommend that our institution strive to emulate Holland's model. While our single class cannot by itself change the direction of our university, our experimentation represents the process of institutional change that Holland describes: "The new context for change in higher education is dynamic, iterative, improvisational, and adaptive," [with] "administrators and faculty...willing to begin new activities not knowing in advance how things will turn out" (Holland, 1999, p. 70-71). By advocating and modeling the creative risk-taking that Holland prescribes, we feel that USF can find new ways to simultaneously meet its goals as a nationally recognized research institution and as a citizen in a rapidly changing social, economic, and political environment.

The view of the university as an engaged citizen has gained popularity in recent years, and there is a growing body of literature suggesting that engagement meets both those new demands external, as well as internal to the university. The postindustrial economy demands a new role for universities as knowledge hubs, and citizens and legislative bodies, increasingly critical of universities for retreating to their ivory towers, call for them to bring their intellectual capital into the civic arena.

Parallel to these demands for external engagement are pressures for change from within the academy. Universities have grown increasingly fragmented, with professional schools separated from the liberal arts, applied research separated from basic research, and student services separated from curriculum. Engagement offers a means to bridge these boundaries. In addition, there is a growing concern that we are not meeting the educational needs of our undergraduate students.

The University of South Florida has experienced all of these pressures. The external pressures are tremendous because of the dramatic population shifts taking place in Florida. It is estimated that 600 people move to Florida each day, most settling in urban areas, resulting in tremendous economic, political, environmental, and social consequences. There are heavy demands placed on the University of South Florida to be a leader in the creation of solutions for these consequences, as it is the only major public university in Florida located in a primary metropolitan area.

Finally, as described above, the University of South Florida has grown tremendously and finds itself at a critical juncture. As a major research institution, its administrators must decide how it will be organized and how it will educate its rapidly expanding student body. We offer lessons learned from a course we taught in the summer of 1999 to demonstrate that revised undergraduate curriculum and pedagogy can better meet the needs of the student body, the university, and the communities that surround it. Our vision of an urban studies undergraduate course questioned many institutional boundaries that traditionally confine both professor and students. This article describes the course and both its anticipated and unanticipated learning outcomes, and we contend that an engaged, interdisciplinary classroom that immerses learners in a community fosters their cognitive development and civic commitment. Such a course also provides a forum for dialogue between university and community participants.

Community Study: Tampa Heights

Our similar research interests and different theoretical and disciplinary backgrounds led us to create and co-teach a dynamic nontraditional urban studies course, described

to students as a six-week summer course offering multiple perspectives on the visions, theories, and practices of redevelopment in the modern city. Focusing on both the historical and the contemporary social, economic, cultural, and political forces that converged in Tampa Heights, a neighborhood bordering downtown Tampa, the course promised to offer students new ways to understand the urban landscape that surrounded them.

We chose Tampa Heights as a site for study for both pedagogical and practical reasons. First, the community embodies many of the issues that interest and concern urban studies scholars. Tampa Heights' history is typical of many urban neighborhoods of the twentieth century. In the late 1800s, many of the city's elite families built Victorian homes in the area adjacent to the developing downtown. But by the 1920s, wealthy homeowners moved away from Tampa Heights because downtown had grown unwieldy, creating a less than peaceful residential environment. By the mid-twentieth century, many of the once distinguished homes had become affordable apartment dwellings for working class African Americans. In the 1960s, social service providers began moving into the area because real estate was relatively inexpensive and Tampa Heights' proximity to downtown and the bus station made it convenient for those to whom they were providing service. In the 1970s and the 1980s, Tampa Heights was primarily inhabited by residents who had created a community in the decaying but affordable dwellings in the area. As was the case around the country, in the mid-80s urban professionals rediscovered the deteriorating but stately houses and the benefits of living close to downtown. They bought and restored the Victorian homes, and the process of gentrification began. During the last few years, city officials began to see the potential of the community and wanted to profit from its proximity to Tampa's central business district, and Tampa's mayor has devised an expansive restoration and building process that includes homes, apartments, and commercial enterprises.

Presently, Tampa Heights is divided into four conflicting factions. The "original residents" have lived in Tampa Heights for several generations and are being pushed out because of increasing real estate prices and the destruction of some of their dwellings. The gentrifiers have created and constructed their own exclusive vision of the community. They feel threatened by the city's vision of the neighborhood, have little interest in the original residents, and feel hostility toward the social service providers because their homeless clients wander through the neighborhood. The social service providers feel alienated, and, like the original residents, foresee that increasing real estate prices will push them out of Tampa Heights. Finally, city officials are busy building and promoting the neighborhood with little regard for those who live there. Clearly, this is an over-simplification, but we felt that the divisions within the community provided our students with an opportunity to understand the complexities of a single neighborhood. In addition, multiple perspectives within the neighborhood provided a context in which students could develop their critical thinking skills.

Learning Activities in the Community

Tampa Heights was an excellent, practical teaching site for several reasons. First, while it is six miles from the university, it is near the interstate that passes by USF, making the drive fairly effortless. We recognized as the class progressed that most of our students drove by Tampa Heights daily, never realizing that it was a neighborhood.

Secondly, we had a contact who worked in the neighborhood. Pam, an urban studies student and youth organizer in Tampa Heights, helped us create contacts in the neighborhood and find a classroom at the Tampa Heights YMCA. Finally, because the neighborhood had captured the imagination of the local press, we were able to use current newspaper articles as part of our course readings.

In addition to the newspaper articles, students read about Tampa from the disciplinary perspectives of history, political science, geography, and anthropology. They also read more generally about the development of urban America during the twentieth century. The effects of urban renewal and interstate highway construction on communities across the country, for example, helped students understand that these were not forces unique to Tampa Heights. Students were also exposed to national trends in contemporary cities, such as the resurgence of interest in downtown areas. Finally, we introduced them to materials on methodology that helped to explain how to do qualitative research, as their final project required them to do ethnographic research and interviews with social service providers. The readings were valuable, but we felt that the students would greatly benefit from experiential learning, and quickly discovered that the off-campus learning process began even before the students reached the neighborhood. After taking the expressway from the suburban campus to the inner city neighborhood, one student remarked that as he sped through the consecutive circles of urban growth he "could see the pages of the text turning in front of his eyes."

One of the purposes of the course was to develop students' critical thinking skills by exposing them to the multiple perspectives within the community. We began this process by taking students on a guided tour of Tampa Heights, showing them historic landmarks that they had read about. During the tour, the community was transformed from a subject of discourse to a neighborhood where people at the beginning of the twentieth century had prospered, and then, as the century progressed, had struggled to make ends meet. Additionally, the tour allowed students to orient themselves in an unfamiliar neighborhood.

When we finished the tour, the students, cameras in hand, set off in small groups to photograph the neighborhood, with instructions to simply take photographs of architectural elements that represented their perception of Tampa Heights. After the photographs were developed, we asked students to place the images on a classroom table and group them into perspectives. They quickly learned from attempting to categorize those perspectives that the viewpoints were far more intertwined than they had originally believed. A photograph of a condemned home, for example, could represent a city official's potential profit or an original resident's hopelessness. By categorizing the images, students began to understand the complex interdependence of the community.

The best way for our students to comprehend and evaluate the multiple perspectives that formed the community was to listen to members of Tampa Heights speak about it. We had the good fortune to meet with an official from the Mayor's Heights Project; the president and the vice-president of the community association that is almost completely comprised of gentrifiers; an original resident who is a YMCA custodian; a private investor who is transforming an old Methodist church into studio apartments and retail and office space; and a youth organizer. Each individual complicated

the students' original perceptions of the neighborhood. Before they began meeting people who lived and worked in the community, the students did not wrestle with the multiple viewpoints that comprise Tampa Heights. Instead, they spoke with certainty about the injustice by city officials and gentrifiers to the original residents.

While there was justification for their perceptions, we felt that our students needed to face the discomfort of grappling with the hodgepodge of motivations that constituted the community before they could begin their critiques. We encouraged their confusion by modeling it. For example, when we toured the deteriorating church that had once had a flourishing African-American congregation, we expressed our regret that the church community had vanished. On the other hand, we voiced our enthusiasm for the church's aesthetic potential as a residential and commercial dwelling. While it *was* difficult to sustain ambiguity during our visit and tour of the neighborhood by the city official, his enthusiasm for the neighborhood caught our students off-guard. When these students began to process the fact that the city was renovating and building low cost dwellings that would stand alongside higher income homes and apartments, they began to question their less-than-critical readings of newspaper articles. They were compassionate toward the original resident who spoke to them about her frustration as she saw *her* community become increasingly fragmented. Yet, by the time that the civic association members spoke, they were beginning to appreciate that the gentrifiers, many of whom are either gay, in racially mixed marriages, or African American professionals, have also been alienated and are trying to construct a liberal enclave that they can call home. In short, community members who spoke to the students showcased their passions, prejudices, fears, and hopes for the neighborhood in a provocative way that fully engaged our students. In turn, the speakers were able to spend time with a group of curious, thoughtful undergraduates who represented the university in the best way possible.

We first assessed students' growing knowledge of the issues by giving them a midterm exam requiring them to take on the voices of the many stakeholders in Tampa Heights and write an essay to a general audience explaining current community redevelopment. As part of their final assessment, they also created a partial guide to social services in Tampa Heights, a task that accomplished several goals. First, to gather information for the guide, it was necessary for students to interview social service providers and spend time in the institutions. Second, because they had grown familiar with the forces that constituted the other three perspectives, this project provided them with an opportunity to research autonomously the fourth faction of the community. Third, while part of the students' task was to create a social services guide, they were also required to write a paper that critiqued the role of the social service provider within the Tampa Heights community. Finally, on the last day of class, all of the community members who had spoken to the class, along with the social service providers, were invited to students' final presentations detailing the philosophy, history, and current services provided by the agencies (the critiques were not part of the presentations). This enabled our class to listen to and speak with members from at least three of the perspectives in the same setting simultaneously. (No one from the mayor's office came.) In addition, it provided an opportunity for the representatives to speak to one another in a neutral setting. While we had anticipated that the guide would be our

contribution to Tampa Heights, in hindsight, providing an opportunity for thoughtful dialogue between various members of the community was our most important offering.

Fostering Students' Intellectual Development

We have multiple purposes for teaching Community Study: Tampa Heights. As stated earlier, we feel that experiential learning benefits the students and enhances the relationship between the university and a nearby community. We believe that the complexities of urban studies are best learned by moving in and through urban environments, rather than simply reading and talking about them. Finally, an experiential course taught within a community creates a favorable environment for fostering students' cognitive development. The confrontations that converge in a neighborhood undergoing redevelopment create a complex environment that assists critical thinking because students must wrestle with problems that are difficult, if not impossible, to resolve completely.

John Dewey (1916) contended that critical thinking was best developed when students were engaged in problem solving. The neighborhood of Tampa Heights was a natural setting for a course in solving problems because its redevelopment created a site of struggle where students can witness and evaluate the ways that stakeholders recreate or sustain their identity and voice in order to gain or maintain power. As our students confronted the multiple perspectives that shape Tampa Heights, we attempted to create a learning environment in which tentative conclusions were developed only after divergent views were thoroughly examined. In other words, we encouraged our students to resist dualistic thinking, a particularly challenging effort because our students' inquiry did not have the emotional neutrality of text-based investigation. Instead they were surrounded by an emotionally charged atmosphere of people facing life-altering consequences. As students learned that the community was actually a group of communities working at cross purposes, they realized that, rather than simply championing one point of view over another, their ultimate goal was to understand how groups with differing agendas could best learn to work together. We are not claiming that we or our students left the course with clear solutions to this problem; however, it was what drove the course and kept our students both intellectually and emotionally engaged.

Directing their attention and helping them to understand the inherent problems in an urban neighborhood undergoing dramatic change helped to foster students' curiosity and refine their problem-solving skills. We promoted higher order thinking skills by requiring them to write a critical analysis that evaluated the community role of a social service provider, because social service organizations within Tampa Heights had been criticized for neglecting the concerns of the community. After students obtained data through interviews with providers, they integrated their information, assessed the organization's contribution to Tampa Heights, and made suggestions about how the organization could better integrate itself into the community. This assignment helped foster critical thinking by requiring them to use their expanding knowledge to address a real problem with no easy solutions; to resist dichotomously categorizing the social service organizations in a formulaic essay, and to juggle ambiguity and complexity as they integrated and applied their knowledge. For example, when making recommendations for a neighborhood youth center, one student contended that, "Children may not

understand why they might have to move, or why their best friend down the street was forced out of their [sic] house. Staff members must be educated on the issues at hand in order to answer a child's question or help neighbors prepare and cope with the changes and transitions taking place." Another student claimed that she could see no single answer to the community's problems. "To determine what it will take to bridge the gap between the different facets of the community is uncertain," she wrote. "However, the answer may only be determined through trial and error."

The course helped develop students' cognitive development by allowing them to confront a complex problem in a community within the city in which they live. In addition, they read about Tampa Heights from a variety of disciplinary perspectivesand they learned about the community from two faculty members from different disciplines and community members with varying perspectives. Because there were no "textbook" right answers, they were forced to look to one another and themselves for potential answers to the community's problems. While this intellectual development is significant and offers college and university teachers a possible model for linking the university, the community, and the student, we feel that such a course and its potential for intellectual development may also provide an opportunity to transform students' perceptions of themselves as citizens.

Perry (1970) characterizes intellectual development as a progression through holistic, increasingly differentiated, and integrated structures. Generally, these structures are divided into three categories: dualism, relativism, and commitment. Briefly, dualistic persons view the world in terms of right/wrong or either/or; relativistic ones abandon the search for right and wrong and begin to search for a variety of answers dependent on the context; and committed individuals are characterized by taking responsibility for their lives and making choices in the multiple contexts of life. While we are not claiming that all of our students made dramatic jumps up the Perry schematic ladder, we do believe that Community Study: Tampa Heights and other community courses like it help students begin to move away from dualistic thinking and accept a more ambiguous and complex view of the world. Such growth allows our students to appreciate perspectives and experiences that differ from their own. For example, one explained that, "I have learned and experienced life's lessons in a way that a textbook could never provide. I not only experienced the desire to understand and learn more about race relations, poverty, history, economics, and government, but I have become interested in researching urban renewal and the mechanisms that generate it. This class has sparked areas of interest that I was not aware existed. I will continue to pursue these areas, as I am much more appreciative of the world and the people who inhabit it." While researching and writing her final paper, another of our students reached some tentative conclusions that demonstrate the potential of such a course. "Integration will never succeed if the belief is that change is impossible," she contends. "It is that attitude that will continue the separation between long-term residents and gentrifiers in the Tampa Heights neighborhood. History may have set a precedent for the existing attitudes that prevail between the different communities in Tampa Heights, but it is the people who believe that there is no hope who continue it."

Conclusion

The pedagogy utilized in Community Study: Tampa Heights is appropriate for students regardless of the type of higher education institution they attend, but we feel that it is especially appropriate for undergraduates enrolled at research universities, because they are often shortchanged by their institution's focus on disciplinary-based research and graduate education.

While the benefits of our course accrued primarily to the students who took it, we see it as providing benefits to other stakeholders, both internal and external to the university. For example, as faculty members who come from different theoretical and disciplinary backgrounds, we routinely exchanged our disciplinary perspectives as we explored Tampa Heights together. Facing the complexity of the endeavor challenged our intellectual assumptions, and informed and developed our own research agendas. Indeed, our new interest in the developmental stages of student learning is a result of our course, and we hope to test and develop an assessment of our theories when we repeat it in a different Tampa neighborhood next summer.

Furthermore, we believe that our teaching methods provide a model for contemporary undergraduate pedagogy. Perhaps such techniques are more easily integrated in an urban studies course; however, we believe that the model can be applied to the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and the arts. With creativity and a suspension of control, a community component can be added to courses throughout the undergraduate curriculum. We believe that, as more faculty members in research institutions experience the benefits of this teaching style, the university culture will climb down from the tower and move toward the model of the engaged university.

Finally, we modestly address the benefits external to the university. The broader community benefits from the graduates who leave the university as more reflective and committed citizens and employees. Tampa Heights benefited because the course delivered both a product (the resource guide) and a process (the opportunity for dialogue during the final presentation). But we certainly do not wish to exaggerate the significance of either of these. Perhaps the most valuable lesson for Tampa Heights, a neighborhood that is receiving a great deal of attention from external forces, such as the mayor's office and local media, is the realization that a group of university students can interact with community residents for a period of time with no negative consequences. It was our goal that the students come to understand the competing perspectives within the community and to make recommendations about how these viewpoints might be brought together in a common, or at least less fragmented, vision. It would have been presumptuous of us to imagine that we could make a significant contribution to the dynamics of the neighborhood. We did not come to Tampa Heights as "naive experts," instead we were gracious guests, eager to learn from the experience of our hosts.

Suggested Readings

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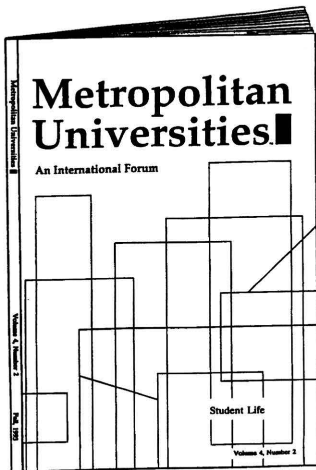

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