The Pedagogy of Community-Based Learning: Do students learn?
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I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide **the conditions in which** *they can learn.* (Albert Einstein)

There are two types of education: One should teach us how **to make a living** *and the other should teach us* **how to live**. (John Adams)

In many respects the two quotes above exemplify two of the core issues in modern pedagogy and especially those related to active learning and teaching methodologies that highlight critical thinking. Einstein's quote underscores the role of the professor as the facilitator which in turn enhances student-led learning and thus critical thinking. On the other hand Adams highlights the very critical dimension of education; namely that it is also a tool to be used in daily life and not just abstract theory for "ivory tower" academia. Thus, the two quotes combined also exemplify the philosophy of community-based learning which is at one and the same time an interactive and dynamic teaching strategy as well as a process of enhancing civic qualities among our students. In other words for university students to absorb *critical thinking* as a learning process as well as learn *how* to be citizens, students must *act* as citizens and faculty should attempt to provide the context within which this can happen; the community. Therefore, higher education must connect subject matter with the places where students live and the issues that affect us all. Nevertheless, universities appear to have failed to recognize the benefits of student engagement with their communities in acquiring knowledge. Thus, this short essay will explore some of the issues related to the pedagogic and academic benefits to be derived from such teaching strategies and make use of examples from my own teaching at AUC in order to contribute to the debate.

The whole art of teaching is only the art of **awakening** *the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of* **satisfying** *it afterwards.* (Anatole France)

Teaching "development studies" at AUC presents a unique challenge in that both students and faculty consider and discuss daily in class what we all experience in our civic lives by virtue of just living in Cairo; a global city exemplifying an urban environment which incorporates practically every aspect of development theory and praxis. In this respect the environment itself - Cairo – accomplishes the first part of France's dictum and it is up to faculty to formulate strategies that will make the best use of it in order to achieve the second element. In doing so we also engage with modern pedagogy which following extensive research notes that *"the focus is changing and must change from teaching to learning; from outer-directed, "expert"-driven curriculum and methodologies to more learner-centered, experience-based, connected ways of acquiring the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for life in the world in which we now live and the rapidly changing world in which our young people will live and work* (Poulsen 1994, p. 2). Thus, I proceeded to develop my own teaching strategy accordingly and a syllabus that would reflect it. Let me elaborate.

At a conference Zeke Zellerman (*Association of Experiential Learning*) noted that there are three critical elements in developing a syllabus which will make us of community-based learning as a teaching strategy: framing (planning), the activity itself, and reflection (Dukehart 1994). These became my own guiding principles and accordingly the courses I teach are developed around them.

Framing (planning): The clearer the framing the more the students will get from the experience and thus we work as a partnership of three: the community-based organization, the student and myself. We set the goals, objectives, methodology and highlight the expected learning outcomes for the students; which are also of benefit to the community-based organization. For example, a comprehensive "grant proposal" for an NGO assisting children with basic learning disabilities in poor districts of Cairo, managing waste disposal in Ain El-Sira (Cairo) in order to enhance environmental quality, enhanced dissemination of information in a particular poor district of Cairo so as to reduce non-compliance in taking the medicine that can eradicate "Lymphatic Filariasis" which affects 2.5 million Egyptian annually, etc. Thus, students contribute and learn at one and the same time.

Activity itself: Invariably involves field-work where students work closely with the respective community-based organization and carry out specifically designated tasks such as surveys, focus groups, etc. that will enable them to produce the final product that will be given to the organization and also be incorporated in their final class assignment. To ensure that field-work is structured, students are expected to make short progress presentations to the class and at each stage and also show how "development theory" has been integrated in their practical work and informed their development praxis.

Reflection: This can also be referred to as a de-briefing of what was learned at the end of the fieldwork phase and is done in class with a representative of the community-based organization in attendance. Here students highlight what went right, wrong and the unexpected, lessons learned and suggestions for improvement. The discussion also engages the organization representative and the other students. The students then proceed to write this up as an academic term paper, with appropriate and relevant theory, and it is submitted as their final assignment. Invariably students perform to a high level and assignments are worth reading!

It should also be noted that this process is also constructed on the foundation of extensive cognitive research which notes "*that intelligence and expertise are built out of interaction with the environment, not in isolation from it. This research shows that effective learning engages both head and hand and requires both knowing and doing.*" In fact, Berryman and Bailey (1992) note in their classic book on cognitive research that "*passive, fragmented, and decontextualized instruction organized around generating right answers adds up to ineffective learning*" (p. 68). Furthermore, the sociology of learning also informs us that "*learning involves reproducing the real-world environment for learning. It involves active communication with expert practitioners, intrinsic motivation for learning, cooperative learning, and competitive learning to compare the processes developed by various learners to create a product*". (Owens & Wang, 1996: 10)

Thus, we can now answer in the affirmative the title question and in fact move beyond and note that community-based learning also contributes to critical thinking and student-based learning. **So why do so many faculty shy away from it?** First, it is generally assumed that it is due to the sanctity of the "content" which so many educators see as paramount and thus community-based learning is seen as detracting from that priority. In fact, however, such faculty do not only fail to see the benefits to be derived from students applying what is learnt in the classroom to real life situations, but there is also a "hidden agenda"; the element of time involved in preparing for community-based learning to be integrated into the syllabus.

> *Community-based learning requires time, effort, and expense. Time is needed to allow faculty to work individually with students in identifying and planning learning objectives, in arranging for involvement of community sites, and in helping students reflect on their experiences. Other practical considerations include liability coverage for times when students are outside the school building, transportation issues, and the need to schedule blocks of time so as to allow students sufficient time to get to and from their learning sites as well as to become active there. Orientation and training of both educators and community mentors are also essential. (Owens & Wang, 1996: 12)*

Nevertheless, and despite the effort required, pedagogic research has shown that community-based learning produces such benefits for students and the community that surpass whatever difficulties of time and effort may be involved. As educators we owe it to our students to explore and make use of what facilitates learning, critical thinking and prepare them for their future careers in the real world. To avoid this and seek refuge in the "ivory tower" of academia is to fail in our primary role as educators and also to fail in the trust our students and their parents place upon us. Community-based learning has been shown by extensive pedagogic research to exemplify what is best in the process of learning. Not to make of use of it in our curricula, syllabi and classrooms is to negate our primary role as educators.

Sources:

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- Owens, Thomas & Wang, Changhua (1996) *Community-Based Learning: A Foundation for Meaningful Educational Reform*, Paper presented at the World Future Society Meeting, Washington DC.

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