ENGAGING ACROSS INTRACTABLE DIFFERENCES: WHY, WHEN, AND HOW SHOULD EDUCATORS WORK WITH?

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Abstract. When should instructors encourage students to work across ideological differences and within unjust institutional structures in order to affect change? What are the dangers and challenges inherent in working across seemingly intractable differences in the community? And what is the value of such a pedagogical approach? The scholarship on feminist pragmatism, wicked problems, and democratic deliberation offers a set of tentative answers — a means forward — for instructors wrestling with these questions. In this article, Danielle Lake argues that the integrated application of insights from thinkers such as John Dewey and Jane Addams provides instructors with flexible tools that can empower students and foster place-based systemic change. The recommendations presented here emerge through the integration and the application of their philosophical ideas in place-based community engagement efforts with undergraduate students. In place of prescriptions or standardized formulas, Lake presents tentative observations, piecemeal strategies, and practical tools. In particular, she emphasizes the need for mutuality and reciprocity, narrative and perplexity, relationship building and cooperative action, as well as the expansion of our ethical framework in community-based learning practices. Instructors could, for instance, do more to invite others in — and to get out of — the classroom, to broaden their scope, to engage dialogic tools, and to privilege relationships. Collaborative, tolerant activism can create critical spaces for engaging the tension within difference, supporting reflexive action subject to comprehensive oversight. By exploring the value of a hybrid feminist pragmatist approach to engaging across divisions, as well as its dangers and challenges, Lake ultimately offers strategies for mutual and transformational change.

Dramatic and systemic change always begins with “critical connections.”

— Grace Lee Boggs

Negotiate challenging the system while working within the system. Remember, it is about rocking the boat, not ejecting yourself from the boat. You need to be in the boat to make changes as an insider.

— Niki Latino

Walking away from a particularly tense course — a course that required my students and me to work with a set of community partners on incredibly complex and controversial local problems — it struck me quite plainly how much easier it would be to stay within the four walls of my classroom, to stay within the theory of our texts, to opt out of confronting the very real issues we were addressing. In

the isolation of the classroom, it is easy to lay blame at others’ feet and to sidestep real-world complexities. In fact, in these moments of tired unease about my role as an engaged scholar and instructor, the abstract realm of academia has a particularly strong appeal: utilizing class time as an instructor in order to dissect ideal theories and complain about the problems we collectively face, while simultaneously doing little (or often nothing) about these issues, is often inherently satisfying. From the vantage point of a weary and downtrodden public philosopher, a purely academic space appears to be not only easier, but also far more pleasant than the path I had set for myself and my students. In these moments, I have repeatedly asked myself, “Why? Why step in?”

Guided by this question, what follows is an attempt not only to uncover the why, but also to articulate tentative answers around the when and the how of engaging across ideological differences and within unjust institutional structures in the undergraduate classroom. Given the risks and the effort involved, the criticism that will likely follow, and the lack of training for entering oppositional community spaces with undergraduate students, I begin by offering reasons an educator should consider doing it in the first place. Engaging those we fundamentally disagree with can offer them a patina of legitimacy, contaminate our own reform efforts, and taint our identities; it can reinforce unjust practices and waste limited time, energy, and resources that could have been better devoted to resistance. Even more troubling, when in inherently vulnerable positions, it can cause direct, immediate, and long-term harm. Even so, I will argue there are dangerous opportunity costs to remaining within the realm of ideal theory and the four walls of our classroom. First, complex, social problems — such as poverty, crime and policing, racism, and mass incarceration — are unlikely to be equitably or inclusively meliorated through isolated, expert intervention or competitive, narrowly framed win-lose strategies. Second, failing to engage means we forgo opportunities for students to learn across intractable differences, expand their ethical framework, and build the capacity and the resilience needed for a “wicked” world. This means we leave in place — in our very communities and on our campuses — a dangerous climate of fear, anger, cynicism, and apathy.

After exploring reasons for engaging across difference, and outlining a feminist pragmatist vision for such practices, I explore a set of hybrid strategies for deciding when and how instructors might employ a working-with model even when confronting seemingly insurmountable differences, suggesting that instructors expand the traditional notion of what counts as legitimate knowledge by inviting in diverse perspectives and getting out of the classroom, by asking students to explore the values and assumptions that underlie seemingly intractable differences, and by reimagining what can count as student “work” (and thereby considering the merits of less traditional, “scholarly” outputs). Such practices can help students explore how they might act within and between differences, while encouraging them to

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simultaneously explore the merits and challenges of operating in various roles (e.g., as community liaisons, critical interpreters, or open-minded advocates).

Situated within my own lived experience of enacting and refining these ideas, conclusions emerge from a feminist pragmatist methodology. As such, the argument emerges from reflexive-iterative-action: merging theory-with-praxis and leveraging my own lived experience. Given that many of the recommendations are derived from my first few years “in the trenches” of this work, I offer only tentative observations, piecemeal strategies, and practical tools: hard-won insights that have tested the methods recommended and further molded the strategies outlined. Ultimately, I seek to illuminate both why and how a feminist pragmatist working-with model might be an effective pedagogical approach to stepping in to our differences.

**Why Work With When It’s Easier to Opt Out?**

**The Scale and Types of Our Shared Problems Demand It**

As rigorous as abstract theorizing and traditional classroom debates can be, they can yet leave in place a set of unexamined assumptions about ourselves and our world: assumptions that, while convenient, are also dangerous. For example, scholars studying the intractable nature of our large-scale, systemic messes — such as the war on drugs, terrorism, or housing and homelessness — argue that there are a core set of assumptions underlying common defensive responses to these issues. These assumptions include the belief that we are exempt from what is happening, that the situation won’t actually change, or that other people will do the work of keeping us safe. The nature of our collective problems — the fact that they are both intertwined with other messy problems and evolving as we study them — means that any attempt to intervene is likely to have a series of unanticipated consequences. Such problems were labeled as “wicked” by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber in a 1973 article on the challenges of city planning. Since that time the phrase has been taken up by a number of fields seeking to address emergent, high-risk public problems, such as those surrounding food systems, global climate regulation, health care reform, and the war on poverty. A host of uncertainties surround such messes and our efforts to intervene often yield unforeseeable and far-reaching consequences. Given that such problems resist simple techno-expert interventions, they require the willingness and the

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3. This is especially true when we consider who is and is not present within academic classrooms.


wherewithal to work across intense divisions. Wicked problems remind us of “two notions” critical to more effective and collaborative responses: they remind us “that reality is constantly changing,” and that we must “be aware of the new and more challenging contradictions that drive change.” Opting out, and thus isolating ourselves from different perspectives, can exacerbate social problems.

It Uncovers Mega-Denial

To use Deweyan language, failing to engage the real world means we foreclose the opportunity to experimentally question unreflective habits of thought (i.e., strong, unconscious defense mechanisms). Inquiring into complex problems in isolation and abstraction “encourages irresponsibility” and a disregard for the consequences. In fact, refusing to step in to the complexities of the situation as it is unfolding can encourage “mega-denial” about the realities we confront. Indeed, as the situation worsens, research shows that the intensity of denial about the complex tensions involved often increases.

Working across a broader span of interests, and engaging with those “on the ground” struggling with these challenges from different positions, can provide us with a more comprehensive understanding of the situation. For instance, examining local food challenges by engaging experts from not just a variety of fields, but also from a variety of institutions (education, government, for- and nonprofit, etc.) can help us frame the problem more holistically: what are the problems as defined by others? What reality could we create in place of the current situation? And what should we be creating? We often act without a comprehensive, collaboratively constructed “blueprint” of the messy situation we are seeking to address and, by doing so, we foreclose the opportunity to develop a “shared sense” of the issues we confront.

It Shifts a Climate of Fear and Cynicism

In addition to our isolation from — and subsequent ignorance of — the perspectives of others, scholars and practitioners of democratic deliberation say we also confront a “climate of fear.” For many, it is far easier and safer not to “wade into the high volume shouting matches and ad hominem attacks that can

10. See Alpaslan and Mitroff, Swans, Swines, and Swindlers, 82–83.
characterize public discourse.” Engaging across our differences can never be an entirely safe process. The fact that oppressive and discriminatory practices pervade our institutional structures and individual habits means there is no completely safe space for dialogue. As such, we must consider the need for bravery. Stepping into the fray is inherently risky and challenging.

In addition, a climate of fear is frequently co-present with a strong dose of cynicism about our ability to work across differences. Where cynicism emerges from a sense of inevitability and certainty, courage emerges from the very process of stepping in, from an openness to others; hope, however, tends to require (and inspire) a lot more work from us. This is why calls for change that suggest working within the system and engaging in dialogue across our differences are consistently rejected as “absurdly naïve”: “In the face of political influence, economic pressures, and cultural differences,” cynics say, such efforts are “a fantasy.” While valid concerns can be raised about our ability to overcome our own biases and loyalties in order to co-create and implement equitable and integrated policies, Dewey reminds us that much of the current cynicism is unhelpful and unnecessary. I argue his cautious optimism sets us up to be more attuned to the outcomes of our actions. It encourages us to consistently “survey conditions” in our attempts to “make the wisest choice we can.”

It Encourages Thinking Together

A stance of cynicism can reflect a defensive reluctance to subject one’s position to scrutiny. It can also reflect a false, overly simplistic and romantic vision of dialogue. Dialogue, as “the art of thinking together,” is, in fact, an incredibly arduous and uncomfortable process. This is why deliberative scholars suggest that “one of the most important contributions we can make to public life is to create safe spaces where diverse points of view can be expressed, deeply held differences can be explored, and the potential for discovering common ground amidst the cacophony can be nourished.” Supporting this position, research on transformational learning shows that respecting diverse views, emphasizing real-world consequences, and fostering relationships is critical to motivating

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14. Ibid., 139.


and transforming thinking. Working-with can shift defensive posturing, apathy, and cynicism by providing critical spaces and opportunities for more deeply understanding the position of others and our shared humanity.

**It Fosters Collaborative Virtues and Habits of Engagement**

Thus, we need to foster epistemic humility, cautious optimism, and creative confidence. Building upon the work of pragmatists through her philosophic activism in Detroit, Grace Lee Boggs says we need to move away from the convenient and often overly simplistic “blaming the other.” Addressing systemic injustice requires that we move from “degeneration to reconstruction;” it requires we get creative in a “dual sense.” We need to be “both imaginative and generative.” We need to move from observation to collaborative action. This requires a “practical and philosophical ... leap.” Feminist pragmatist Mary Parker Follett came to the same conclusion, arguing collaborative engagement is necessary since it is, in truth, the “people who do the doing [who] are also thereby doing the thinking.” Indeed, Follett argued that it is a mistake to so quickly pit ourselves against others; instead, we must co-create a better world through engagement with them.

Research shows citizens are more capable of grappling with complex social messes than many believe. Our social messes require piecemeal, reciprocal, and messy engagement, a commitment to fallible, context-dependent co-learning, as well as the willingness to consider disparate knowledge, wrestle with issues of power, and engage others across our differences. By working with real-world problems defined by all those involved, we begin to see the inherently messy situation more fully and to seek ameliorating, contingent, and experimental answers. Given that most “social change takes place through the reconstruction of habits,” a more experimental, dialectic, and iterative reconstruction of our shared problems is needed. Such an approach is likely to “open up new ways of seeing, new approaches to sense-making, and new opportunities to work together to apply what we learn by ‘reading’ our environment.”


Pragmatists begin with a hopeful view of dialogue across differences as one of the only avenues available to us for fostering openness, tolerance, and cooperative inquiry; the very practice of engaging across our differences can encourage the cultivation of dialogic habits in ourselves and our institutions. It can lessen our ignorance of the other (and the fear that often accompanies that ignorance), encouraging connections critical for amelioration. Recognizing the need for something like this, Boggs and Scott Kurashige remind us that change must be two-sided: transforming ourselves transforms our institutions.26 This is about spanning boundaries, or, at the very least, building the capacity and the disposition to try.27 As an exemplary case in point, I next explore the life and work of Jane Addams — and feminist pragmatism itself.

**The Vision for a Pedagogy of Engagement across Difference: Feminist Pragmatism**

As a founding feminist pragmatist, Jane Addams’s life’s work — involving both place-based local activism and global outreach — is a powerful illustration of working across differences in order to affect systemic change. She embodies the activist-oriented philosophic commitments that are at the core of pragmatism and feminism, including a commitment to a relational and experiential epistemology, to a philosophy grounded in contest and activism, and to addressing unjust and inequitable social problems. In particular, “her efforts to interpret across class and cultural boundaries … [in order to] reconstruct the social order and increase justice for women and the underprivileged” place her squarely at the “intersection of pragmatism and feminism.”28

Indeed, the impact she had on her time and place cannot be discounted. According to Jean Bethke Elshtain, almost “every piece of major reform in the years from 1895–1930 comes with Jane Addams’s name attached in one way or another.”29 Addams was an incredibly effective boundary spanner and, as such, there is quite a lot an engaged instructor can learn from reviewing her life’s work.30

As a social activist, public scholar, and deliberative facilitator, Addams’s efforts to alleviate needs, empower others, and reform unjust and ineffective policies are staggering. She also embodies the skill set and virtues essential for direct action work. For instance, Bill Moyer’s Grand Strategy lists five key engagement methods for transforming social structures: activism, organizing, story-telling, cultural work, and practitioner work. While most committed to

28. Ibid.
social justice efforts utilize one or two of these different methods in order to affect change, Addams utilized all five. And she did so through a willingness to live and work within the tension of difference.

Addams is not, however, associated with direct action — defined as the confrontation of and resistance to state power in addressing social injustices. Indeed, she disliked lobbying, was never fully comfortable with antagonism, and was committed to nonresistance practices. As “a stance of responsivenss toward others,” as “a mode of listening,” Addams’s nonresistance was not so much about the refusal to use force, as it was about beginning in — and returning to — the experiences of others in order to test our conclusions. Confirming this point, Addams scholar Judy Whipps writes that becoming aware of the “connections between us requires a particular framing, a way of listening as well as questioning.” Recounting the “self-conceit” and fear surrounding her commitment to youthful ideals, Addams writes that she had “no notion of the obscure path of tolerance, just allowance, and self-blame” that can open our minds so that “we might learn something of the mystery and complexity of life’s purpose.” In place of a deep conviction to ideals, she chose to value relationships across ideological differences and thereby live in the “slow, plodding dullness that genuine social reform requires.” And since institutions are the embodiment of people, one avenue for affecting change within current unjust structures is through just such a stance of openness to others, through the privileging of relationships over ideological differences, and a commitment to sympathetic understanding.

According to her biographer, Louise Knight, there is an additional set of compelling reasons why Addams is not associated with direct action, including an eagerness to understand, superb listening skills, deep empathy, enduring patience, and a strong ability to synthesize. As judged by the sheer volume of reforms she was able to accomplish, these skills proved to be incredibly effective. As Addams believed, successful efforts for reform require that we consult everyone involved so we can uncover “what the people want and how they want it.” Scholars of democratic deliberation and systemic engagement agree that these skills are

34. See Fischer, “A Pluralist Universe in Twenty Years,” 5.
essential for effective, long-term transformation. In contrast, “becoming fixated on one’s own certainties” is an all-too-common barrier to change efforts.  

On the other hand, Addams’s “dogged commitment” to democratic fellowship was essential to her ability to make headway. Addams’s efforts to foster democratic action led her to conclude that change, when not accompanied by honest dialogue across our differences, is likely to be undermined at almost every turn. In fact, her commitment to working with others in order to address the challenges of her time led to her being labeled as a radical. According to her nephew, “the only group who did not regard Jane Addams as radical were the radicals themselves.” Addams was an “apostle of tolerance,” always working to ensure she was never “controlled by fanaticism or panic.” While labeled radical in her time and place, she was radical, he says, through her commitment to reciprocity and open dialogue, to working across differences, not through mere “social unrest.” Addams concluded that we must move beyond discord and disagreement toward collaboratively imagining and enacting new ways of being in the world together. She was also radical for her commitment to action: she wrote that “action is the only medium” that we have “for receiving and appropriating truth.”  

The tension between holding fast and flexing in Addams’s work highlights the need for — and value of — “open-minded advocacy.” The term, coined by Kristin Shrader-Frechette, requires advocates for change to search more broadly and openly for disparate facts, uncertainties, and values-in-tension; it also ultimately requires collaborative engagement. Indicating Addams’s skill on this front, she was able to foster and sustain many friendships across intense disagreements — including with conservatives, individualists, manufacturers, and aristocrats. Indeed, the ability to advocate for change and to maintain relationships across powerful differences is a marker of open-minded advocacy and a constant refrain within feminist pragmatism. Follett, in fact, concluded that a willingness to

38. Knight, Jane Addams: Spirit in Action, 68.
39. See James Weber Linn, Jane Addams: A Biography (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 155. Addams’s nephew, James Weber Linn, said that she learned to distrust legislation when it was not “preceded by full discussion and understanding.”
40. Ibid., 162.
41. Ibid., 158.
42. Ibid., 161.
43. Addams, Twenty Years at Hull-House, 73.
45. See Linn, Jane Addams: A Biography, 157–158.
engage across difference is “the hope of democracy.”

Aligned with these insights about the critical need for open-minded advocacy, current research on the values and skills most essential for ameliorating systemic challenges suggests that tenacity, commitment, passion, assertiveness, and persuasiveness are essential; but it juxtaposes these skills with those of patience, emotional intelligence, empathy, self-awareness, and curiosity — ultimately also highlighting resilience, competence, and optimism as essential.

Feminist pragmatism demands mutuality and reciprocity: asking that we consider how we might give as well as receive, learn as well as teach, reflect as well as act. Follett refers to this as a process of “power-with,” suggesting that deliberation and co-action can result in “power over ourselves together,” in place of domination and submission. Feminist pragmatists highlight the essential dimensions of working-with under inherently messy, dynamic social problems. The core dimensions of this approach are narrative and perplexity, fellowship and cooperative action, sympathetic understanding and the expansion of our ethical framework. In general, a certain level of epistemic humility and tenacity are necessary for coming to understand the positionality of others and thereby expand our own ethical framework. For feminist pragmatists, knowledge is contingent and co-constructed. In fact, as a process for flexibly and collaboratively responding to our shared problems in real time, feminist pragmatism enacts Dewey’s call that scholars see themselves as “liaison officers,” interpreting and utilizing processes of inquiry in order to enact a better future. Thus, feminist pragmatism has much to offer engaged instructors seeking to work across diverse interests. With reasons for, and a vision of, engaging across differences before us, critical questions yet remain about when and how instructors and students might work within unjust institutional structures and across intractable divides.

When Should We Work from Within? When Should We Resist from Without?

Given legitimate concerns about manipulation and placation, there is certainly value in having students explore how they might work outside of official circles. Community deliberation and activism are critically important because of


their independence from policymaking circles. Bottom-up activism can increase awareness and encourage radical transformation of the portrayal of an issue. It can “motivate others to act” and expand the range of alternatives on the table for discussion. Follett’s concern about power-over (top-down, hierarchical decision-making processes) and a narrowly framed focus on majority rule, as well as her recommendation that we begin in and with local action, resonate with these concerns. Thus, I recommend next that decisions about when and how to engage may be approached through assessing the situation along the lines of Sherry Arnstein’s ladder of engagement, weighing the effort of stepping-in against its possible impact, and considering the merit of a both/and approach.

**Scale the Potential**

Engaging within unjust structures and with those we disagree with across differentials in power is a questionable endeavor worthy of careful scrutiny. For example, even when those with authority to make decisions are willing to come together, there is no guarantee that they will actively and nonselectively listen, or that they will incorporate recommendations into new policies. Given that such engagement can simply operate as a shield of democratic legitimacy, Arnstein argues we can and should weigh our decision to work within based on the degree to which our efforts are backed by power. Using Arnstein’s ladder of engagement as a possible heuristic can help instructors and students weigh a number of important concerns. We can, for instance, weigh the likelihood that engaging can lead to tangible, valued outcomes (for us, others, and the immediate situation). We can consider how to structure our involvement so that it is more fully supported by power and legitimacy (how might we create a potential partnership so it moves beyond placation and consultation, toward cooperation?). We can also consider what opportunities for our own learning and growth might emerge (how might an opportunity that yields no tangible progress or common understanding yet be a source of transformational learning?). Not only can we pose these questions to ourselves and our students, we can pose them to “the Other.”

**Consider Impact versus Effort**

We can weigh the time and energy required from us in our efforts to step across these divisions. Too often energy spent trying to work within current channels, trying to convert the adversarial or the skeptical, is energy diverted. Activists

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53. Slightly better than an attempt to manipulate participants, processes that seek to inform and consult have some value, but when deliberators lack power, they simply have no “muscle” to ensure their concerns are “heeded.” For instance, “informing citizens of their rights, responsibilities, and options” is an “important first step” but “too frequently the emphasis is placed on a one-way flow of information — from officials to citizens — with no channel provided for feedback and no power for negotiation.” See Sherry R. Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4 (1969): 217 and 219, respectively.
rightly worry that we provide legitimacy to unjust policies and institutions when we go to meet with those in power who support them. Doing so, Iris Marion Young warns, “co-opts the energy of citizens committed to justice, leaving little time for mobilizing people to bash the institutional constraints and decision-making process from the outside.”54 In contrast, rebellion can more quickly “shake up old values” and sever threads of injustice.55 When confronting exclusion, power imbalance, or acute harm, immediate demands for change may be necessary. Under time constraints within systems of suffering, we must be leery of depleting limited resources in order to convert the resistant.56 While we can weigh our willingness to engage by assessing the situation against these metrics, we could also easily use such an assessment as an excuse to assume stepping in is not worth it.

**Employ a Both/And Approach**

Although attempting to engage in a discourse across differences may end up yielding “a complex product of structural inequality,”57 some evidence shows that sanctioned deliberations often do impact policy, whereas unofficial collaborations and processes less frequently yield significant change.58 Too much insulation can lessen the likelihood of sustained impact. It is frustrating and disheartening when robust conversations and transformative deliberative conclusions remain mere thought experiments. This is precisely why pragmatists emphasize the need for an iterative process of joint action, not simply deliberation.59 Thus, an initial response should not always be to simply ignore or oppose, but to listen deeply. By developing the wherewithal to go beyond rebellion, we begin to see ourselves as capable of creative reorganization; we begin to develop the capacities and virtues needed for this work.60

While an activist may focus more on outrage and emotion, a deliberativist focuses on reason and argumentation. I argue neither, alone, is sufficient. Pragmatists remind us that emotion and reason-giving are not two separate entities. Experience involves our entire beings and the context in which we are embedded:

54. Young, “Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy,” 682.
57. Young rightly points out that structural oppressions are insidious in our discussions. To the extent that our thoughts rely on unquestioned cultural norms, structural oppressions are often unconscious and go unnoticed in the dialogue. Young, “Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy,” 685 and 686.
59. For Dewey, “there is, literally, no knowing without doing and no doing without power. Inquiry is more than just a process of gaining knowledge about the world; it is inherently an issue of power.” See R. W. Hildreth, “Reconstructing Dewey on Power,” Political Theory 36, no. 6 (2009): 789.
60. According to Boggs and Kurashige, we must go beyond protesting injustice so we can decrease dependency and increase self-determination. Boggs, with Kurashige, The Next American Revolution, 67.
our bodies, minds, and emotions as well as our social and physical environments.\textsuperscript{61} Since emotion and reason, learning and doing, are actually interconnected, and since privileging one above the other tends not to yield co-transformative systemic change, why not explicitly encourage students to engage their full selves? To think, feel, and act iteratively. We should, that is, create legitimate space for narrative and argumentation, passion and reason-giving, difference and connection, talking and acting. According to Boggs and Kurashige, we “urgently need ... impassioned discussions.”\textsuperscript{62} And, as Addams and Follett suggest, it is by engaging in our differences that we increase the chances of uncovering root conflicts, seeing the larger whole, and thereby opening spaces for responding through joint action. There is value in coming together; if we uncover no common ground, then perhaps we move on, but we must not so easily foreclose the merit of beginning with a flexible stance of engagement.

**How Might We Work With Those Working On?**

**Vignettes from “the Field”**

If the above arguments have convinced the leery of the potential for engaging across divisions, then the more practical question of how an educator might do so remains. How might we help students explore the potential of going beyond protest politics? Taking such a call to action seriously means educators would need to consider how we might invite a wide range of others into the classroom, step out into the space of others with our students, explore the tensions between, listen for moments of connection and values-in-alignment, and ultimately ask that they ponder possible next steps and opportunities. It means we would provide students with the opportunity to listen across difference, to bear witness to the tensions between various views, but also to imagine other ways forward (and perhaps even act toward those goals). Thus, next I briefly describe a number of lessons learned from the integration of application of this approach.

**Invite Them In**

Research has consistently shown that when tasked with examining complex, high stakes, divisive issues, students (and humans generally) often arrive at convenient, overly simplistic conclusions that assign blame elsewhere.\textsuperscript{63} For instance, an initial review of the challenges surrounding healthy and local foods within the U.S. school system led students to quickly assign blame to food service providers. With this initial student framing in mind, I asked a representative from this local food service company to share their story and their perspective on the issue of healthy and local food in our schools. Though at first reluctant to share the organization’s perspective, their very real story of struggle under dynamic and complex systems transformed students’ initial framework.


\textsuperscript{62} Boggs, with Kurashige, *The Next American Revolution*, 52.

In this instance, for example, demands to meet dietary preferences of many school-age kids clash with demands to provide nutritious and local food; changes in policies and procedures without student buy-in tend to exacerbate the levels of food waste; new and quickly evolving governmental regulations cause confusion and increase costs; pressure to keep the cost of meals low places additional constraints on change. Economics, policy and liability, health and nutrition, physiology, culture, and psychology clash in this complex situation. Inviting in the local food service provider generated a first-hand account of experiential efforts under way to implement better practices, including efforts to incorporate local farmers and chefs, recipe development, and educational reform, as well as faculty and staff training. By contextualizing the realities of such issues within our local community, we can help students sketch a picture of the larger systemic pressures (including a profit-driven bottom line) that constrain potentially fruitful change.

Direct contact and empathetic listening shifted the initial assumption that the company [and those within the company] were the sole entity to blame. It fostered a powerful realization about the heavy constraints under which institutions and individuals “contributing to the problem” are often themselves operating. It is not hard to see that engaging a diverse group on any complex social issue — including those “to blame” for the problem — can prevent overly simplistic framings of the matter and convenient finger-pointing. In fact, direct engagement with those whom students have identified as causing or contributing to the problem can lead students to understand the issue as far more real, local [contextualized], and complex. Direct engagement also fosters community across differences and expands students’ ethical framework. It can ultimately illuminate the need for — and value of — cooperative action. It enacts the feminist pragmatist practice of contextualizing abstract ideas in concrete experience and opens opportunities for co-action.

Instructors could, of course, easily use such tactics to powerfully convey only certain sides, and to manipulate the way in which students come to understand the situation. The temptation to narrowly frame the issue can be resisted by making room for knowledge construction that honors the lived experience of the full(er) girth of those involved. This aligns with Valerie Brown’s recommendation that we do more to value different knowledge cultures, including not simply expert knowledge, but also community, organizational, and holistic knowledge.

Thus, that same semester students heard from well-known local advocates and food sovereignty specialists, nutritionists, urban gardeners, and others. A more comprehensive framing of the situation requires that we broaden the scope of who counts and what counts; it requires that we invite others in. It also encourages us to uncover opportunities to get out of the classroom.

GET OUT, LISTEN, INTEGRATE, AND DISSEMINATE

In taking the risk of engaging across differences, there are often a lot of unknowns about the other, unarticulated assumptions, and subsequent tensions. Attempts to collaborate can easily generate unease, tension, and conflict. This challenge has been borne out in my own experience. Indeed, more extensive discussions between students and a new nonprofit organization developing a self-sustaining farm revealed that the nonprofit was proceeding with narrowly framed assumptions about the community they were seeking to serve, that is, about residents’ values, problems, and needs. It became clear that the organization was proceeding without having engaged with the community. Recognizing this, students were leery of supporting the organization in any way. While this discovery could have been grounds to discontinue our association with the organization, it could also be an opportunity for students to negotiate the practical and ethical challenges of what is, in reality, not an uncommon scenario.67

Thus, instead of immediately ending the partnership, students collectively thought through how they might pursue a plan of action that broadened the inclusivity of the nonprofit and utilized their own passions and skill sets in order to make a real difference now. With these goals in mind, students ultimately decided to talk with local residents about their most pressing concerns, hopes, and goals; students decided to synthesize and share these insights with our community partner, but also with any other stakeholders who might listen. The goal was to helpfully (re)shape decisions being made by this organization so they were more likely to align with residents’ own hopes and concerns. In the students’ published report, they wrote that they “planned to serve these neighborhoods by coordinating, structuring, and facilitating dialogue about the local food systems.” With a goal to elicit key concerns and core values, they sought to reach out to “community leaders, residents, and local business owners” and then “direct a conversation … conducive to storytelling and participatory dialogue.”68

There are a number of dimensions to the student-designed plan-of-action that yield particularly valuable insights for others: it attempted to bridge the gulf between the nonprofit organization and the community it sought to serve; it sought to foster common ground; it opened opportunities for context-sensitive co-action. In addition, the more public dissemination of their findings opened up possibilities for others (beyond the nonprofit’s director) to respond to the concerns noted. When there is greater possibility of manipulation or placation, open dissemination of findings can increase the chances voices are heard and actions follow.

67. Students signed a release form agreeing to the publication of their insights through the openly accessible ScholarWorks platform.

Consider Taking Action

It was, in fact, the expectation for action that catalyzed the creative imagining of a means forward. Students were not passive listeners, but active participants in imagining a way forward. They were forced to consider how their own actions might reshape the situation. If students had not been expected to go beyond consuming and analyzing the information from the nonprofit’s director, it is unlikely there would have been a catalyst for moving beyond critique and toward creative co-action. Feminist pragmatists remind us that possibilities for creative integration across difference require not just a willingness to listen, but also “sphere[s] of activities.” The issues that arose in this partnership are not uncommon in community-engaged learning. A separate team of students actually came to the same general conclusion, recognizing “a major flaw in [their] first two project ideas: they were top-down approaches. One of the fundamental pillars of grassroots advocacy is to work with the community, not on them.”

Students’ participatory action efforts reflect Addams’s own insights. The challenge is to seek out the ideas others do have, not those that we assume them to have. As educators we can encourage these practices by asking students to get out and listen across diverse perspectives, value narrative as a critical way of knowing, integrate their insights across diverse positions, and more openly share what they have learned. Such practices harness Dewey’s recommendation that we operate as liaisons in order to facilitate real-world change. Engaging across difference can help students discover the challenges and the merits of crossing boundaries; it can also help them explore how power operates between networks and institutions.

Seek Connected Values

These experiences illustrate the value of asking students to engage in real-world, project-based work in connection with a wide array of stakeholders. Doing so can move students from the expectation that partnerships demand shared values and toward a willingness to uncover and leverage areas where values connect. Through such engagement students are asked to collaboratively seek out connected values even across seemingly insurmountable differences and explore the potential merit in resisting the temptation to demand shared values. Such efforts align with a feminist pragmatist commitment to value, rather than to resist.

69. Follett, Creative Experience, 82.

70. Ibid., 150.


ignore, or reduce, difference. We move toward valuing difference by seeking to foster trust within networks, leveraging and sharing effective processes openly, and engaging aspects of the problem in collaboration wherever and whenever possible.

A local nonprofit offers a prime example of this. In order to create a much-needed commercial level composting project in the area, this nonprofit partnered with a local fast-food restaurant. By partnering with one of the “enemies,” considerable, tangible good has been done in the “here and now.” While there is a very real danger of allowing the here and now to trump more substantial long-term transformation, we must maintain an eye to the opportunity costs of refusing to engage. Jane Addams’s change efforts led her to recommend the same. She ultimately “allowed herself to believe that more could be accomplished by the effort to understand one another than by the effort to fight one another, in the ward as in the world.” Indeed, Dewey reminds us that even when such efforts fail to yield short-term transformations, the process itself fosters “practical attitudes” and “a readiness to act in certain ways,” valuable habits likely to be of service in future endeavors.

The value of unusual alliances and diverse networks is manifold: they can move us beyond our own positionality, expand our ethical framework, spark creative integration, and harness collective intelligence, ultimately generating habits of engagement that are more inclusive, just, and responsible. In so doing, they can also foster the capacity and the resilience for long-term collaboration. Given the vast differences between various stakeholders, tension is omnipresent; and it can and must be engaged.

Conclusion

In real-world, messy, dynamic situations, working within unjust structures and with those with whom we disagree confronts us with a host of “tensions and ambiguities.” It opens us to the possibility of “attack from all sides,” and demonstrates that the “process of curing the ills of democracy with more democracy is fraught with risk and contingency.” While working with “the other” carries the very serious risk of “reinforcing evil,” we must not so easily dismiss the dangers of refusing to do so. Refusal “also risks complicity with evil.” In an inevitably interdependent world, we are — wicked problem scholars and feminist pragmatists remind us — always complicit. There is no genuine “outside.” Stepping

77. Fischer, “Reading Dewey’s Political Philosophy through Addams’s Political Compromises,” 228.
78. Ibid., 243.
79. As Dewey says, “everything that man achieves and possesses is got by actions that may involve him in other and obnoxious consequences in addition to those wanted and enjoyed.” Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 44.
into the fray provides a vantage point we cannot achieve in isolation; it creates a potential point of entry for reflective action and a disposition toward engagement. As the examples described in this essay demonstrate, working within the current structures and with those with whom we disagree can also increase our sensitivity, foster habits of courageous and creative co-action, and catalyze more inclusive and effective change.

Working across intractable divides provides us with the opportunity to change and be changed: to challenge the limitations of both our own and others’ assumptions. It increases the potential for fellowship across differences, encouraging the transformation of unreflective mental habits and the expansion of our ethical framework; it creates a space for engaging the tension within difference, supporting more reflexive action subject to comprehensive oversight. My goals for this article were not only to uncover reasons for engaging, however, but also to uncover strategies.

The strategies ultimately recommended emerge through the integrated praxis of these fields, through forays into public philosophy and deliberative activism. These can be summarized into five themes:

1. **Invite in and get out**: Intentionally and consistently invite the other in and move out into the space of others.
2. **Broaden the scope**: Recognize the value of diverse ways of knowing; invite community, organizational, and lay knowledge; and encourage narrative.
3. **Engage dialogic tools**: Emphasize empathetic listening and utilize the tools of dialogue in order to engage the tension between our divisions and seek connected values.
4. **Require creative brainstorming and action planning**: Move beyond critique, designing community-and-student-led projects that require ingenuity and action planning.
5. **Privilege relationships**: Weigh the merits of developing and maintaining relationships across even seemingly intractable divisions. Movements tend to be born from “critical connections,” not from “critical mass.”

This work calls on instructors and their students to develop a more radical tolerance, a willingness to live within ambiguity, along with a wealth of generosity, humility, curiosity, and resilience (that is, open-minded advocacy). It calls on us to “exercise power, not take it.” However prepared or unprepared we feel for such work, pragmatists remind us that it is also the case that by engaging in these practices we simultaneously work toward developing the skill sets and values they require. A review of our history and current public division suggests a

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81. Ibid., 76.
means forward will not be found through isolation, ideal theory, or purely rational debate. Instead, a means forward will need to be codiscovered. It will be “painfully acquired,” and it will likely be an “imperfect good ... mixed with evil.”\textsuperscript{82} But it is through engaging this tension that we strengthen “our imaginations, sensitivities, and capacity for wonder and love, for hope rather than despair, for compassion and cooperation rather than cynicism and competition, for spiritual aspiration and moral effort.”\textsuperscript{83} It is through engaging such tensions that we become more fully human.

\textsuperscript{82} Addams, \textit{Democracy and Social Ethics}, 98.

\textsuperscript{83} Boggs, with Kurashige, \textit{The Next American Revolution}, 41.