

Teachers' revitalizing the 'culture commons': An ecological imperative for
the 21st century curriculum

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Abstract: This paper reports on a summer program for educators that sought to prepare them to teach in and through the 'cultural commons' in the summer of 2012. The 5-day Academy for the Critical Inquiry of the Cultural Commons set out to foster knowledge of the cultural commons and their importance in the forging of ecological intelligence among contemporary educators. In this article, the Academy program and some of the work of the participants within it are described in detail. The authors define the 'cultural commons' and the relevance of this concept in contemporary education. The theoretical framework for the work is described along with descriptive vignettes of educators' experience.

Environmental scientists and activists have been voicing increasing alarm over the impending ecological crisis wrought on by Western techno-scientific, market-driven industrial practices. These practices threaten the quality of life on earth for all species. These pervasive Western practices have eroded intergenerational knowledge and led to losses in linguistic/cultural diversity among the world's people. Non-consumer exchanges have been reduced, natural systems (water, farmland, forests, and fisheries) are being rapidly privatized, and the earth's resources are depleting precipitously.

Bowers (2004, 2006) and others (Mies & Shiva, 1993; O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004) are urging a 'revitalization of the commons' or an extolling of the indigenous practices and forms of knowledge and skills that have constantly been renewed over multiple generations. These spaces and activities, known for centuries, as 'the commons' consist of the life-sustaining physical spaces, intergenerational traditions and non-monetized exchanges that include the responsible use of the natural environment and its elements (i.e. air, water, vegetation) and the cultural aspects of everyday life (language, crafts, values, norms and social structures). The natural and the cultural commons are the practices that initially forged communities and sustained life for thousands of years (**The Ecologist** 1993). And, these are the practices that remain ecologically viable today as they do not involve forms of dependency on consumerism or the need for life-time employment as the only means to sustaining a high quality of human life (Bowers, 2011).

The 'cultural commons', although not consistently lauded in sites of formal learning, are certainly evident today. These are the actions that have been upheld through local systems of meaning-making and decision-making processes over many generations. The movement to 'revitalize the commons' requires active and purposeful consideration of those traditions and practices. The identification of these practices and actions includes attention to the potential within each of us to sustain and encourage such activities as part of our overarching efforts to educate others about ways to curtail the further degradation of the environment, reduce consumption, (re)establish the honor of local linguistic/cultural diversity, encourage wider public involvement and foster knowledge of and access to all our natural systems (<http://www.ecojusticeeducation.org>).

The dire threat posed by the enclosure (the depletion or privatization) of the commons globally can be halted if we actively interrupt these detrimental practices through relevant education and a reconceptualization of the curriculum in Pre-K-12 and higher education. Educators can take the lead by integrating this knowledge and these practices into the broad school curriculum (Bowers, 2006). The need, therefore, for teachers to learn about the cultural and natural commons, their importance in the processes of education and the ways these might revitalize communities today is paramount. Educators should learn how to promote understanding of the 'commons' into schools, universities, and community educational programs through curriculum redesign, new pedagogies, and an active engagement with the community. Integrating this knowledge across all disciplines and across the wide spectrum of education is a judicious and worthwhile effort. Such work supports the cultivation of 'ecological intelligence', (Bowers, 2011) among adults, young people, and children.

The purpose of this paper is to report on a summer program for educators that sought to prepare them to teach in and through the cultural commons. The 5-day Academy for the Critical Inquiry of the Cultural Commons set out to foster knowledge of the cultural commons and their importance in the forging of ecological intelligence among contemporary educators. In this article, we describe the Academy program and some of the work of the participants within it. We define the cultural commons and the relevance of this concept in contemporary education. We offer an explanation of the theoretical framework that grounds this work. Finally, we offer descriptive vignettes of educators' experience and work through the Academy with an invitation for others to replicate our own efforts.

Approximately 20 educators embarked in this inaugural effort to define and revitalize the 'cultural commons' through ethnographic work in a summer academy. These educators were largely graduate students enrolled in teacher education, doctoral studies in interdisciplinary studies, and adult and continuing education. The aims of the 5-day academy included: 1) to cultivate a foundational knowledge of the cultural commons and forms of enclosure; 2) to introduce key concepts in eco-justice theory as the theoretical foundation of this work, and; 3) to guide educators work in the community to research and report on the presence of cultural commons and forms of enclosure. Educators attended 5 days of full days of varied events including speakers, community panels, films, and demonstrations. They conceived individual or small group projects that exemplified the cultural commons and forms of enclosure and prepared them for inclusion in a film on the academy. Through the rich experience, these educators developed abilities to understand the value of the 'commons' as foundational knowledge for an ecologically integrated curriculum and many have embraced the importance of social commitment to these ideals and to the creation of curriculum that will educate children, youth, colleagues, and other community members to these ends.

Key Characteristics of the Cultural Commons

Elizabeth stands with her mother, her sister and her granddaughter as they demonstrate how to can tomatoes and make fruit jellies. Elizabeth's mother, aged 92, took great pleasure in explaining the process to an enthralled audience. The audience was comprised of graduate students at the university where Elizabeth, her daughter, is a full professor in the College of Education. Elizabeth described the ways that her sister, her mother, her own daughters and, now, her granddaughter grow, harvest and can food each year, a intergenerational practice in her family. Each year, they enter their home grown foods into the local Kendall County Fair contests. Invariably, they leave with one or more blue ribbons, another long-time family tradition.

Elizabeth and her family are practicing an important aspect of the cultural commons, the intergenerational knowledge of local food production and cooking. In their participation in the 5-day Academy for the Critical Inquiry of the Cultural Commons, they are also realizing another one of the benefits of the cultural commons - bridging academic and local community knowledge to build stronger, interdependent and ecological community.

The central organizing concept of the Academy for the Critical Inquiry of the Cultural Commons is an understanding of the ‘cultural commons’ and forms of enclosure. There are two types of ‘commons’: the natural commons and the cultural commons. Both forms of the commons have sustained humanity for thousands of years. The natural commons are the environmental conditions shared among us that are outside the money economy. These are the air, water, land, and all other forms of naturally occurring resources that have historically been shared freely among humans and were not privatized or put up for sale.

The cultural commons emerged from human exchange and the sharing of their knowledge, skills, patterns of mutual support, and their information of the resources in the natural environment, the cultural commons have existed. They still exist in every community and represent the culturally diverse legacies that are less dependent upon a money economy and consumerism. They also leave a much smaller ecological footprint, and tend to be more in harmony with the natural world than concerned with control of it. The cultural commons include the creative arts & craft knowledge, food production & cultivation, bartering and non-monetized systems of exchange, cultural dance & expression, oral history & forms of narratives, healing and medicinal practices, ceremonies & games and heritage languages.

These cultural commons are becoming increasingly important as economic globalization is forcing more and more people into poverty. The increased automation of work and rapid global economic changes we are experiencing across the globe are being controlled by multi-national corporations that exert strong influence over work and labor, politics as well as many of the aspects of our social and cultural lives. What remains of the ethnically diverse cultural commons and the intergenerational skills, knowledge, and mutual support systems are more important than ever. This knowledge and these ‘ways of being’ in communities and in the world can help struggling people everywhere to engage in community-centered lifestyles that encourage personal talents, mentoring relationships, local decision making, and awareness of the ways that market and technological forces undermine cultural and social life. In short, fostering the cultural commons serves as a viable alternative to a consumer-dependent lifestyle that is destroying our environment and depleting our natural resources. The ‘cultural commons’ builds strong communities and support the preservation of the world’s necessary biodiversity and fledgling ecosystems.

The Academy

During the summer academy, local educators and activists participated in many activities. Five full days consisted of: academic and community speakers, demonstrations, films, interactive panels and discussions, and related field work. Additionally, approximately 8 faculty at the host university participated in the events of the week. Many worked with faculty to further their knowledge and conceive their community projects through dialogue and small group discussion. Some of the most pivotal events were the academic talks delivered by educational philosopher and internationally known eco-justice educator, Chet A. Bowers who offered 3 in-depth talks on subsequent days of the Academy. Patrick Slattery, internationally known curriculum

theorist also delivered two related talks for educators. Most events were also open to the public and many sessions featured interaction of graduate students, practicing educators, and community members. In all, the week offered community members and educators opportunities to dialogue and reflect on the ways this work is or could change their work as educators and community participants. In addition to their sustained engagement and work on specific individual 'commons' project, they also consented to be interviewed and videotaped by a professional filmmaker.

As part of the 5-day long Academy study, educators investigated their own communities to find local examples that exemplified a revitalization of the 'commons'. During the week, educators enrolled in the Academy for graduate credit created cultural commons projects. Others who had existing projects added on or revised their work. These interdisciplinary projects include investigations of community arts centers, cultural centers, farmer's markets and community gardens, recreational centers and programs for youth and community food and educational programs for families. Others selected local articulations of national or international initiatives including: narrative birthing, La Leché, the Slow Food movement, Farmers' Markets, and the Occupy movement. Others reported on smaller, informal efforts including swing dance mobs, youth built skate board parks, local ecological sustainability, and community gardens. Others brought forth examples from local ethnic practices including the revitalization of Folklorico dance in Latino communities, and the art and cultural activities of a local Hispanic activism organization.

The work of the organizations such as Say Sí a San Antonio community art center, the Vista Del Valle Community Garden of El Paso, the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center and The House of Neighborly Service in San Antonio were among those investigated from the local context. Local knowledge about larger social and cultural movements including reports on the practice of Narrative Birthing (a non-commodified approach to family-centered childbirth), Farmers Market in the Southwest region of the US, the ecological practices of the Occupy Movement in NYC, La Leché League, and a proliferation of the 'Creative Commons' or international free internet access for all. Local, more organic examples of the cultural commons included: the teaching of Henna painting to Arabic American youth, the development of skateboarding parks by skaters in abandoned highway infrastructures in the city, youth adaptations of Folklorico dance that featured diverse forms of music, a local restaurant involved in the slow food and local food movement, and several urban community gardens. Educators interviewed participants, observed and engaged directly with people and their practices in the communities. They compiled videos, webpages, Wikipages and UTube videos to depict their experiences. These examples gleaned from educators' ethnographic work, provide compelling proof of the relevance and increasing interest in a revitalization movement among for the cultural commons.

Theoretical Framework

In forging this work, we relied on Bowers' (2000) work that builds upon Bateson's (1972) notion of "double-bind" thinking to clarify how the Western notion of

progress undermines the very ecological practices required to sustain its culture. The double bind, as applied to a consumer society, illustrates the schizophrenic notion that consuming the world's resources unabated will bring happiness; yet, happiness in life depends on having clean air, water, and available resources (Bowers, 2000). The degradation of the earth undermines the ability of living things to survive and to thrive, yet Western market-driven consumerism degrades the environment (Bowers, 2011). The consumer culture drives the individual to satisfy self-interest to privatize through individualized material accumulation of goods rather than consider the richness of the collective, the cultural commons (Bowers, 2011).

The assumptions of the Industrial Revolution supported the rights of individuals and companies to pursue material culture at the expense of the environmental and cultural commons (Bowers, 2011). Many assumptions of the market economy have become rationalized and are so pervasive in Western thought that they are now tacit knowledge. It is a taken-for-granted that consumerism provides limitless jobs, brings happiness and promotes innovation. These assumptions reflect the double bind thinking that more accurately describes the reality of a consumer-driven, market-based economy. In fact, such practices incur mechanization which can result, ultimately, in a loss of jobs, poisoning of the environment, and relentless filling of landfills and ocean dumping. Importantly, a monetary-based, highly-mechanized society also severs connections to intergenerational sharing, degrades non-scientific knowledge, and wreaks havoc to natural systems through deforestation, animal extinction, and destruction of existing ecosystems.

Awareness of language as a tool for cultural reproduction is critical to understanding Bowers' (2010) work. Bowers (2010) considers words as metaphors, and cautions us to consider that words bring with them assumptions related to their historical origins and applications. Many words are passed down through cultures with little awareness of the assumptions assigned to the metaphor. The interpretive framework for these metaphors (words) evolved over long periods and came from time period when concern for environmental degradation was not yet apparent and the perception of endless resources prevailed. Root metaphors are those words that advance certain views that reflect the dominant culture and its agenda while hiding alternative perspectives and possibilities (Bowers, 2010).

For example, the root metaphor "progress" summons positive associations that reflect improvement; however, hidden meanings actually include a unprecedented loss of resources and environmental sustainability are silenced (Bowers, 2010). Such interpretive framing of words such as "wealth" and "poverty" tie these notions to a monetary-based economy. These culturally defined terms support accumulation and privatization. An alternate perspective may define "wealth" in terms of family, friends, and health, yet often these alternative considerations are silenced. The market-economy strategies assault the senses with persuasive metaphors for wealth as an accumulation of commodities, technologies, and replacement of out-dated style.

The double bind presented by the root metaphor of “progress” assumes that mass consumerism produces employment, and employment drives the economy (Bowers, 2010). However, in a continuous success and strive for mechanization, mass production of goods does not necessarily create jobs. Rather, mechanization often absorbs jobs and leads to unemployment. Unemployment in the market economy relegates the individual to a low social position. Additionally the unemployed are blamed for their failure to secure wealth to support themselves. Reliance on the individual rather than the commons creates a Darwinian notion of economic survival that leads to social classification (Bowers, 2011).

This point was viscerally made by participants in the Academy who describes forms of enclosure they encountered in their daily life. Sheila* described her surprise as a new employee at a major automobile company. As a new hire, she was invited to tour the assembly line. While she expected to see people busily engaged in the work of assembly production, she saw, instead, a factory line of machinery with fully mechanized stations and very few people employed there. She was also told of the virtues of this mechanization by top managers who reported that the automation does not often make errors, does not require sick leave or organize unions for higher pay.

The cultural commons encourage mutually supportive relationships based on a shared cultural understanding. Conversely, Western consumer lifestyle assumes that individuals are self-reliant and ultimately offers blame rather than support (Bowers, 2011). The cultural commons provide the “difference that makes a difference”, restoring cultural knowledge and ecological health and disrupting the “common sense” notions of Western consumerism. The differences that make a difference include eating food that was grown through traditional knowledge of weather patterns, planted in soil rich from conservation, and cooked using recipes that have been handed down through generations (Bowers, 2004b). Compare that to highly-processed Western food transported across many miles by fossil-fueled engines, grown with chemical fertilizers, and dispensed through a fast food window. While the former sustains the land, contributes to the health of the person, and incorporates familial contact, the latter degrades the earth and robs people of important physical and emotional nourishment.

The colonization of Western ideals through industrialization of so-called “Third World” countries embodies an arrogance that silences traditional concerns for the environment and marginalizes the value of mutual exchanges within the commons (Bowers, 2004b). The wisdom of local knowledge passed on through generations tends to embrace practices that sustain relationships between people and their environment. Relationships through the cultural commons advance concrete understandings of ecological wisdom more effectively than abstract scientific thinking as is common in much eco-pedagogy (Bowers, 2004b). Educators would do well to incorporate concrete examples of the environmental and cultural commons in their curriculum through practices such as the examples illustrated in the Academy’s students’ projects: community gardens, shared non-monetary aesthetics such as art, music, and crafts, and mutually supportive groups that advocate for democratic values. At the core of education for a sustainable future, students recognize a moral obligation to develop ecological

intelligence and cultural competency through concrete exposure to the richness of the cultural commons (Bowers, 2004b).

This work is an important contribution to pedagogical understanding of how language carries forth the dominant discourses as ingrained patterns of thinking with no critical reflection on how those patterns of thinking undermine the cultural and environmental commons. Exercises to decipher vocabulary meaning and chip away the assumptions associated with words provide critical thought. Such exercises lead teachers and their students to consider the differences that make a difference in their cultural and environmental education. Viewing “progress” as a metaphor for eroding culture and environmental wellness is critical thought that makes a difference in the curriculum. Cultural traditions that were once considered a roadblock to innovation and progress are reconsidered and viewed as valuable to the community and the environment (Bowers, 2010).

Our theoretical frame formed the basis for the academic talks that foreground the Academy of the week. Five lectures in all (one per each day of the academy) provided educators with ways to think about change and the construction of their own knowledge and a more complex understanding of ecologically sustainable educational reforms. As educators, this framework pushed us all to think beyond simple solutions of conservation. We sought to challenge unsustainable cultural practices but also to posit challenge to also endorse the practices that need to be conserved and intergenerationally renewed through education. This work is much more than a documentation of the folk traditions of different cultures, which is a limited way of thinking of the cultural commons.

Implications of Cultural Commons from the Academy

A preliminary examination of the projects completed by teachers in this academy indicates ways that teachers increased their understanding of the concept of the cultural commons and forms of enclosure. More than a dozen completed group and individual projects strongly aligned with the criteria presented by the academy organizers upon completion. Every submitted project was subjectively evaluated by a five-point rubric scale that included attention to and a requirement that each meet all specific criteria. These criteria included the representation of a practice, skill or knowledge that includes the teaching of skills, crafts that are less reliant on monetized exchange; a renewal of intergenerational knowledge through face-to-face relationships; a counter to the pervasiveness of consumer culture; an intention to foster interdependency, promote community and support systems through face-to-face interaction, and efforts to diminish the ecological impact and promote sustainability through its practice.

Moreover, the relationship between ethnic knowledge and the cultural commons was particularly pronounced in three of the twelve projects, indicating the potential of relevant ethnic, religious and racial knowledge to emerge through a focus on the cultural commons. It is likely that local, ethnic knowledge can emanate from a curriculum rich in the cultural commons, strengthening local school and community relations. Shenoor investigated the establishment of an after school program for Arabic youth in the San

Antonio area. The women who started the program wanted to support young people's knowledge of ancestral practices while providing an free, open space for young people of Arabic background to build a community. The older women taught the young people how to use henna paint on their skin and how to prepare some of their traditional foods. This forum of 'cultural commons' activities were immensely popular with the young people and included American sports of basketball and chocolate chip cookies. The cultural commons does not necessarily mean that only the ancient practices are the only ones supported. Instead, the women governing this program embrace a cultural commons approach that includes a focus on decision making, local knowledge, ancient traditions, and less of an economic footprint.

Conclusion

The challenge for us as educators is to introduce students and community members to the knowledge of the culturally diverse local 'cultural commons' that represent alternatives to the industrial system of production and consumption that are not only ecologically unsustainable, but erode our heritage and divide our communities. As educators, we can guide others to recognize how learning to participate in the local cultural commons—ranging from the growing and sharing of food, healing practices, narratives and ceremonies, creative arts, craft knowledge and skills, games, language, patterns of mutual support, civil liberties, knowledge of local ecosystems—can enable all to avoid poverty and the hopelessness that results from current economic and technological developments. Cultivating the commons in our communities will help halt environmental degradation, connect us to nature and to ways of living in harmony with it. It will foster ways of knowing and being that have sustained people for thousands of years, well before the dawn of the industrial revolution. Clearly, educators today are obligated to teach about the cultural and natural commons, if we are all to survive and combat the pervasive market forces that undermine the intergenerational traditions of community self-sufficiency and local democracy. Our task, as educators, is to encourage students to find the cultural commons that exist in every community and to identify the mentors and systems of mutual support that exist therein.

The commons also supports students to become explicitly aware of ethnic differences among the cultural commons as they acquire the competencies necessary for deciding what needs to be conserved and what needs to be changed in both the local commons and the scientific/industrial system of production.

Certainly, the spread of poverty that can be attributed to recent economic and technological changes across the globe, as well as the deepening ecological crisis that will have the greatest impact on the already poor and marginalized, means that teacher education, curriculum studies, educational leadership and adult education programs can no longer remain silent about the nature of the world's diverse cultural commons, about the powerful ways that the commons can contribute to the viability of the environment, democracy, and human rights of current and future generations.

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