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# Teaching Social Justice through Community Engagement

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## **Keywords**

Adult education, Experiential learning, Social change, Social justice

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## **Teaching Social Justice through Community Engagement**

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### **Abstract**

This research was motivated by our desire for our students to achieve a deeper appreciation for the social justice aspect of our field, adult education, and also to engage them with the community. We sought to accomplish these ends as students at two different state universities volunteered to build a home with Habitat for Humanity. Data was collected using focus groups and reflective papers and analyzed using a constant-comparative method. We found that student engagement with Habitat for Humanity resulted in students' personal growth and to a lesser extent they learned something about the potential of adult education to contribute to a more equitable and just society.

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### **Introduction**

One of the basic tenets of andragogy (the art and science of teaching adults) is that adults' life experiences are a reservoir for learning (Knowles, 1980). As professors of adult education we apply this concept in the college classroom by requiring students to "experience" adult education, rather than simply "read" about it. As a means to have students experience adult education we added a field based component with Habitat for Humanity to our respective classes.

Our partnering with Habitat for Humanity served two purposes: 1) to expose learners to adult education's potential, when operationalized through a community based organization, to enable citizens to improve their lives and 2) to foster critical awareness among students of the power of a community based organization to promote social justice. The more visible areas of adult education are arguably human resource development, GED programs and continuing higher education programs. Typically our graduate students are surprised to realize that community based organizations are providers of adult education. Particularly we wanted our graduate students to experience this facet of adult education while engaged with their respective communities through a work day with Habitat for Humanity.

Habitat for Humanity International, founded in 1976, operates in more than 90 countries. The goal is to eliminate poverty housing by providing decent, safe, and affordable homes. Volunteers work side-by-side with partner homeowners to build houses using a combination of local and donated materials. Habitat houses are sold to partner families at no profit. Prior

to receiving a Habitat house, homeowners donate hundreds of hours of labor. When their house is complete, they make a down payment and monthly mortgage payments at affordable rates ([www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org)). Although Habitat for Humanity is not typically thought of as adult education, the model, adopted internationally as a way to improve society, relies heavily on the education of the Habitat beneficiaries.

In adult education, there is an ongoing, long standing tension between the purposes of adult education for individual and personal improvement versus societal improvement. Cunningham (1993), in particular, has faulted the field of adult education for an orientation towards maintaining the status quo especially in its increased orientation towards the techno-rational areas of human resource development. In an effort to ensure that our graduate learners recognize the important historical and reciprocal relationship between adult education and social change we attempted to focus our learners' attention towards the social change and social justice aspects of the field.

Thus our research purpose was to determine what students learned about social justice and its relationship to the field of adult education. On a secondary level, we wanted to know what, if anything, our students gained from the community engaged activity with Habitat for Humanity.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The foundation for our study is drawn from literature on social change, community based learning, social justice, and sociocultural theory. These concepts frame our use of experiential learning with Habitat for Humanity in our classes.

Cunningham (1988) advocates social change as a primary purpose for adult education. She questions, "can social change be accomplished through education?" (p. 136). While many would say no, there are adult educators, like Cunningham, who have resisted the status quo and been able to promote change. Horton, for example, director of the Highlander Folk School (Adams 1975) had a long history of union building, civil rights education and environmental advocacy. A plaque posted at the site of the original Highlander Folk School in Summerfield, Tennessee proclaims its historical significance. It reads, in part, "A 1979 Ford Foundation Report singled out Highlander as the most notable American experiment in adult education for social change." Adult educators who wish to contribute to a healthy democratic society encourage students to "examine ethical issues in ways that promote equality and justice on a daily basis in everyday work" (Cunningham 1988, p. 138). Cunningham argues that it is the responsibility of adult educators to "make professionals critically aware and to encourage practical strategies for making the education of adults work to foster critical awareness in the citizenry" (p. 142). She frames most adult education as a means of social control. Adult education, for the most part, she argues, is elitist and exclusionary. Adult educators are trained in a "psychology of individual deficit." Furthermore, she charges, there has been a decline in the voluntary nature of adult education (p. 75). Although, adult educators may be challenged to envision themselves as agents of social change there remains a vibrant contingent of community educators who continue to advocate the societal benefits of community based learning.

For example, Ellis and Scott (2003) suggest "community-based learning is a necessary component of community development and the rejuvenation of democracy" (p. 253).

Eighty years ago, Alinsky, a Chicago organizer, identified community organizations as “political institutions with three basic characteristics: indigenous leadership and citizen participation; financial independence; and a commitment to defend local interests while avoiding divisive issues” (Warren, 2001, p. 44). These criteria may be observed in local chapters of Habitat for Humanity. Arguably, since it is affiliated with a world-wide organization, Habitat for some may not fit Alinsky’s concept of community organization. In spite of being an international organization, Habitat functions at the local level as a community based organization. It seems clear to us that social change is frequently a precursor to social justice.

Social justice is “the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (Bell, 1997 p. 3) and according to McDonald (2005, p. 421) justice involves the distribution of goods among individuals. The concept of justice can be applied to basic human needs such as housing. In other words, in a just society, all people have a decent and safe place to live. McDonald (2005) suggests teaching for social justice provides “opportunities to develop respect for individuals’ differences and recognizing how those differences might be informed by individuals’ affiliations with particular social groups, such as those based on race, ethnicity, or class” (p. 422).

Education that promotes social change, such as that offered by Highlander, is built on sociocultural theory. Yet, Alfred (2002) argues that although the influence of sociocultural contexts on adult learning has been widely recognized, the individual or cognitive perspective of learning still dominates the field of adult education (p. 4). She contends “learning cannot be considered to be content-free or context-free, for it is always filtered through one’s culture and cultural identity” (2002, p. 5). A sociocultural theory of learning shifts the focus of learning from the individual alone to the individual in interaction with a larger society. In our Habitat field experience, our desire was to shift the learning focus so that our students learned from their interactions with Habitat crew leaders, volunteers, and prospective homeowners and that through the students’ engagement in the Habitat build they would learn about the organization’s mission and outcomes.

Sociocultural theory grew out of Vygotsky’s (1978) theories of learning and development. It is based on the belief that learning occurs within a social world. It recognizes the complexity of factors affecting teaching and learning such as “who students and teachers are, where schools are located, and types of resources available – along with other contextual factors...” (McDonald, 2005, p. 421.) Alfred (2002) agrees that the classroom is only one aspect of the context. Other factors include “history, culture, race, class, gender, sexual orientation and physical ability of students and teachers; roles and responsibilities, and prior knowledge of participants...course design, curriculum, learning activities” as well as “history, culture, and structure of the educational institution” (p. 8). McDonald (2005) proposed that teacher preparation programs developed around sociocultural theory and social justice would improve teachers’ potential to work with diverse students. We believe that an adult education course inclusive of sociocultural theory provides students with an alternative sociocultural lens for learning--an alternative to the higher education classroom which could contribute to their appreciation for adult education as an important tool for social justice.

*The Meaning of Adult Education* is a classic text in the adult education field. Written by Lindeman in 1926, it draws on his life experiences in various settings including the ministry,

YMCA, Boys and Girls clubs and eventually as a professor of social philosophy. He was keenly aware of the ways social context influenced learning. He wrote "educated persons find their satisfactions in bringing knowledge to bear upon experience...But it is not wholly correct to say, 'Bring knowledge to bear upon experience'; knowledge, rather, emerges from experience" (1926/1961 p.110). It was this idea from Lindeman that inspired us to partner with Habitat for Humanity and use it as an educational tool for our graduate students. He said "experience is, first of all doing something; second, doing something that makes a difference; third, knowing what difference it makes" (p. 82).

### What Do We Mean By Experiential Learning?

Many believe they know what experiential learning is and in fact, that is what we thought but as we discussed our respective plans for student field experience with Habitat for Humanity (HH) we realized that we were not clear about what we meant by this term that

is so cavalierly thrown about in adult education and community engaged learning. Usher (1993) describes experiential learning as the "key element of a discourse which has this everyday [learning from experience] process as its subject and which constructs it in a certain way, although it appears to be a term that describes the process" (p. 169).

We chose Boud and Walkers' reflective process model because it demonstrates the essence of experiential learning which is the reflective process. We believe that adults, to a certain extent, are able to objectify their experience. A primary benefit of this model is that it theorizes the learner as interactive with the context of the experience and posits that there are phases of reflection during the experience and post the experience. This model identifies a preparation phase which is important because preparation helps the learner address potential barriers to experiential learning. In this model the learner's foundation for experience is also hypothesized, a position which accommodates the potential influence of sociocultural context. This particular conceptualization of experiential learning is considered by Fenwick (2000) as the reflective (constructivist) approach where an adult can separate her experience from herself. Although our course was based on this approach, the approach is not without critique. Two critiques of this view of experiential learning are first, it includes no appreciation of the role that desire can play in learning and no understanding of the unconscious and the way it affects what one perceives. Second, it assumes a unitary self who has access to a rational reflective process and the ability to mobilize the reflective process (Clark & Dirx, 2000). In response to Clark and Dirx we believe that Boud and Walker's (1993) phases of reflection help learners bring the unconscious into consciousness.

Boud and Walker's reflective process model has three primary phases. Learner preparation is the first phase where the learner is assisted in addressing underlying concerns about entering a new experience and skills and strategies are provided so the learner can make the most of the experience. The second and third phases, can take place through discussion or journaling but using both is ideal. In the second phase, the learner reflects while in the experience. Boud and Walker refer to this as reflection in action (p. 77). Of special interest in this phase is that Boud and Walker acknowledge the significance of the foundational knowledge of the learner. The authors recognize the potential this knowledge has to influence what the learner *notices* and how the learner might *intervene* during the experience. Noticing and intervening are both key activities in this phase. In the third phase, the learner re-evaluates his or her experience (Boud, Keogh, and Walker, 1985,

p. 31-34). In the third phase, the learner returns to the experience and he is encouraged to acknowledge his feelings when in the milieu. Re-evaluation of experience means the learner attempts to connect the current experience with past experience, integrate the experience with existing and related knowledge, tests the experience in some way and then make it their own (Boud & Walker, 1993).

### Research Design

This study was exploratory and qualitative as we sought to understand what meaning the students made of their experiential learning opportunity with Habitat for Humanity. The research design is phenomenological because it emphasizes the emotional and personal experiences of students using data collection methods such as focus group dialogue and student composed reflective papers. Constructionism is the epistemological foundation for our study. Constructionism suggests that experiences are made meaningful by the individual as those experiences are internalized in the individual's subjective conscious (Schwandt 2001, 192). We wanted to gain insight about how the student's construed the meaning of the Habitat experience and further to understand whether they drew social justice implications from that experience.

### Setting

In the following section we briefly overview the communities where we teach and where our classes joined the Habitat for Humanity (HH) projects. Author 2, who is White, teaches at University 2 located in Memphis, Tennessee. Author 1, who is Black, teaches at University 1 located in Tampa, Florida. Students in Florida volunteered (painting, caulking, and building ladder frames) with one of two Habitat chapters—either Tampa or Sarasota. Putting these three cities side-by-side we can see larger percentages of people living below the poverty line in Tampa and Memphis than in Sarasota. And higher home costs in Florida than in Tennessee.

**Table 1.** 2006 American Community Survey Highlights

|                                     | Tampa, FL | Sarasota, FL | Memphis, TN |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| Population                          | 322,428   | 369,535      | 643,122     |
| Individuals below poverty line      | 20.1%     | 9.1%         | 23.5%       |
| Median household income             | \$39,602  | \$48,416     | \$32,594    |
| Owner occupied homes                | 57.2%     | 77.7%        | 54.9%       |
| Median value of owner occupied home | \$206,500 | \$287,000    | \$90,900    |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2006). Retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov>, November 25, 2007

Each of the three Habitat sites had unique characteristics. Memphis and Tampa Habitat were building single family homes. Sarasota was building transitional (temporary) housing. Memphis had greater community involvement in the Habitat build. Students from University 2 made up about 15% of the volunteers on site. In Tampa and Sarasota students were about 50% of the volunteers.

The courses at the two universities are similar. Students in both classes read *Philosophical Foundations of Adult Education*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Elias and Merriam, 2005). Students in Memphis were also required to read *The Meaning of Adult Education* (Lindeman, 1926/1961) whereas Lindeman was an optional read in Florida. Our courses shared the following objectives.

1. Trace the historical origins of adult education
2. Investigate the range of activities, practices, and approaches to adult education
3. Analyze the relationship between adult education and social problems
4. Distinguish different philosophical perspectives of adult education and construct a personal philosophy.

Experiential learning in the Habitat setting helped us meet objectives 2, 3, and 4.

## Participants

**Table 2.** University of Memphis Course Demographics

|       | Women | Men | Total |
|-------|-------|-----|-------|
| Black | 7     | 1   | 8     |
| White | 2     | 4   | 6     |
| Asian | 0     | 0   | 0     |
| Other | 2     | 0   | 2     |
| Total | 11    | 5   | 16    |



**Table 3.** University of South Florida Course Demographics

|       | Women | Men | Total |
|-------|-------|-----|-------|
| Black | 1     | 2   | 3     |
| White | 13    | 2   | 15    |
| Asian | 0     | 1   | 1     |
| Other | 1     | 0   | 1     |
| Total | 15    | 5   | 20    |

### Data Collection

Data was collected through several types of student reflection on their building construction experience with Habitat for Humanity. This study includes data from two offerings of the course in 2006 and 2007 at each university. The reflection process after the Habitat experience occurred in three steps: 1) focus group (FG) dialogue, 2) reflective paper, 3) a second focus group dialogue. The following questions were posed to students in the first focus group:

1. What did you experience during your work with Habitat?
2. How did your experience differ from your expectations?
3. How does this experience prepare you for the complexities and demands of the world of work?
4. Describe the relationship between Habitat for Humanity and one or more philosophical orientations.
5. How does Habitat for Humanity connect with theories or ideas you learned in other classes?
6. In what way(s) does this experience help you gain a greater understanding and appreciation for cultures different from your own?
7. What did I learn about Habitat for Humanity?
8. Does this experience broaden your notion of who should be involved in educating today's students? In what way(s)?

The first FG was audio taped. We extracted themes from those transcripts and from the reading of students' reflective papers. These themes were then presented to students in the

second focus group as discussion points. The second FG was audio taped and themes were extracted. Themes from these three sources were reviewed by both authors and compared to determine what topic areas of the experience students discussed most often. It is important to note that what we are describing here as data collection is an ongoing phase of the class activity. It constitutes the double levels of reflection in which the students participate during the course. More detail on the class activity is provided under the course activity section of this paper.

### **Data Analysis**

We analyzed the student focus group transcripts and we analyzed student reflective papers from each class. We searched for converging themes in the dialogue and papers. We analyzed student responses using a constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each of us separately identified themes—places where the student dialogue and reflective papers converged. However, we also searched for points of contradiction in the data because it is often from these contradictions that the important questions emerge. After analyzing our data we compared our themes. The themes we identified were: 1) students faced their middle-class privilege and its effect, 2) students experienced personal growth, and 3) students experienced a broader perspective of adult education.

## **Course Activity**

The course activity described below was inspired, in part, by Cunningham's (1988) charge to adult educators that it is our responsibility to develop practical strategies for "making the education of adults work to foster critical awareness of the citizenry" (p. 142). The activity follows Boud and Walker's (1993) model of experiential learning and consists of three parts: preparation of the learners, the experience, and reflective processes. Here we frame the design of the course activity using Boud and Walker's experiential process model--preparation of the learners, the experience and reflection in action, and post experience reflection. Within the sub-sections below we outline how we intended for the design to achieve learning about social justice and how the design implemented sociocultural theory.

### **Preparation of the Students**

During preparation, the focus is on the learners, what they might expect at the HH site, their observation skills and strategies that may be helpful in the HH environment. The volunteer coordinator from Habitat for Humanity met with and talked to students about what to wear, how to reach the site, and what facilities would be available. This opportunity for students to talk about their concerns and fears before the experience reduces anxiety which could become barriers to learning. We found students had concerns as basic as "will there be a toilet available at the building site?"

During the preparation part of the process, we explained participant observation (Spradley, 1980) as guidelines that would assist students in noticing differences--differences in behavior, relationships, learning processes. Not only should they observe the behavior of others but they should observe how they themselves behave, who they relate to, how they are learning. In this way we hoped to prepare the students to be consciously attending to the new environment of the HH volunteer site. We did not suggest what they should look for but we did want to encourage them to explore and engage with the HH crew, homeowners, and other volunteers. In order to be critically aware we believed the students had to be consciously aware. In this way we hoped to heighten the possibility that students

would identify differences among people in the environment and not allow their assumptions to overpower their HH experience. We believed this capacity of keen observation would be central to a critical assessment of the experience later in the activity. Sociocultural theory indicates that a student's race, class, and culture influence how and what they learn. We believed that preparing students with basic observational skills would help them move beyond the automatic sociocultural lenses they might otherwise bring to the volunteer experience.

### **Experience of the Students and Reflection in Action**

Working as volunteers at the HH field site was the second phase of the process activity. According to Boud and Walker the learner's actual experience has two parts: noticing and intervening (Boud & Walker, 1993). Noticing and intervening were essential elements to facilitate reflection in action while students were at the Habitat for Humanity field site. We trained students in observation skills which sharpened their ability to *notice*. As volunteers we each had our own set of experiences—learners as well as facilitators. Our "personal foundation for experience" (Boud & Walker, 1993) influenced what we perceived at the site. Each of us holds various "intents" (Boud & Walker, 1993) for what we want to accomplish at the site. Each of us is "noticing" what is going on around us and also taking action based on our interpretation of the experience. Boud and Walker's model fits well with sociocultural theory in the way it foregrounds the influence of each individual's foundation for experience. Said another way, Boud and Walker's model acknowledges the effect of the sociocultural context on what one experiences. The model encourages students to identify *what* they notice during the experience as well as to notice in what circumstances they choose to intervene.

### **Post-Experience Reflective Processes**

In the course activity, there were three opportunities for students to reflect on their volunteer experience: a focus group immediately after we left the HH volunteer site, a reflective paper, and a second focus group where we used themes from student papers and focus group one to guide the reflective discussion.

In the first focus group we used the eight questions listed under our data collection section to guide the focus group. The reflective papers and second focus group allowed students to reconsider the Habitat experience in light of the intersection of their personal perceptions and those of their classmates shared in focus group one.

In the second focus group we re-presented to the students the thematic patterns emerging from a reading of transcripts from the first focus group and from their reflective papers. Using these themes we hoped to elicit critical reflection—reflection on premises and assumptions, reflections on things unsaid. An example demonstrates this point. In the Sarasota course a prevalent theme in reflective papers was the significance of HH to the middle class community. Students held a lengthy and animated discussion on the benefit the middle class gains from volunteering: "it makes them feel good or makes them feel less bad" is how Amy phrased it. A theme unspoken was race. No one in the Sarasota group mentioned race or ethnicity as a defining characteristic of the neighborhood (I personally saw no white person in the neighborhood during our morning) or an analytical variable for the larger inequitable housing situation that drives Habitat for Humanity. In Tampa three students (all African American) mentioned race in their reflective papers. When this limited theme was noted during our second focus group a white student said that because race is not part of her experience it does not come to her mind to consider race in analyzing or describing her experiences. Identifying what was not stated is one way to nudge students

toward greater critical examination of their experience. Choules point is well taken here. She makes the case that when teaching learners from the dominant group the humanistic and liberal approaches prevalent in adult education may need to be abandoned (p.171). Specifically, teaching for social change usually stresses the democratic privileging of all voices in the classroom but it assumes a we-them classroom dynamic, we being the learners aligned against oppression and they being the oppressors. In our classrooms we found these oppositional positions not clearly outlined and this brings into question the role of the instructor's voice. The implication is that the instructor demonstrate a more assertive voice but not in a personalized way because that can cause learners to feel attacked and silenced.

### **Results: What Did Our Students Gain?**

#### **Insight on Middle Class Privilege**

Combined with our study of philosophies of adult education, and after focus group reflection, students began to consider the possibility that Habitat for Humanity promotes social justice. Many of their insights about social inequality were tied to social and economic class. For example, the field experience prompted the following dialogue between two students who recognized their middle-class privilege (all names are pseudonyms): Vicky said: "I feel that maybe I take for granted what I have sometimes." Sarah replied,

That's what I was gonna say too because two of them [Habitat for Humanity prospective homeowners] are building in Plant City and I own a house in Long Lake which is a really prestigious golf community in Plant City so I mentioned that I lived in Plant City but I thought you know because I almost felt guilty saying that...I joked with her I said 'but I'm not on the golf course side I'm over with the common folk.' It made me [realize that] I'm 30 years old and I own a home and you take that for granted that it's something that happens with life and then you realize that there are people who really do struggle. Some people rent their entire lives.

Another student, David framed his realizations about classism this way ... [it's] "embarrassing to realize that a life of privilege made me think twice about crossing the tracks."

Charles, on the other hand, saw how Habitat may be promoting social justice in its approach to home financing. A Muslim student, Charles likened the Habitat loan process to his faith. He noted,

The concept of the interest-free loan practiced by Habitat for Humanity is a part of the Islamic Faith. Habitat for Humanity sets an excellent example for all faith communities...not to pay interest but figure out a practical way to get people into houses without paying interest...I thought about we have been studying the civil rights movement and how that correlates with our constitution. The preamble of the constitution talks about the pursuit of happiness. It is interpreted as the right to own property. Habitat for Humanity is actually putting people in a position to obtain that.

Charles viewed the Habitat practice of interest-free loans as relevant to all faith communities. Interest-free loans make it possible for individuals who would not otherwise qualify, to obtain a home loan. Taking it one step further, one can link interest-free loans

to McDonald's (2005) description of a just society because the loans contribute to a more equitable distribution of goods, in this case housing. Charles was beginning to link Habitat's practice to a socially just society. If such a practice was applied across society it would certainly contribute to more just and equal living conditions.

Victor felt the experience "reinforced ethics of diligence, goal-setting, and working for others." He decided to act by having his technical school students volunteer at Habitat. Lennie, on the other hand, searched within himself trying to figure out how individuals got into this situation of needing assistance from Habitat for Humanity but "quickly dismissed it." Building with Habitat for Humanity seemed to create an awareness of social inequities for some but few students expressed the intent to take action. Lennie's reflection may indicate either a questioning of the system that failed Habitat beneficiaries or individual failings that resulted in their situation. In contrast, we heard most students express personal insights.

### **Personal Growth**

Personal growth was evident as students learned construction skills, cognitive skills, and interpersonal skills. This growth created a broader perspective of what adult education can be. Students developed construction skills including how to measure and cut siding, use an air hammer and power washer. Cognitive skills included learning that caulking had to dry before it could be painted, and that long pieces of siding had to be held a particular way to avoid snapping in two. The prominent theme seen in student learning is summarized in the techno-rational aspect of human resource development described by Cunningham (1988). Primarily the learnings that students described were behavioral, often technical in nature, and cognitive. Additionally, the university students learned that prospective Habitat homeowners are required to attend classes on topics such as financial management and home repair. However students did discuss areas in the affective domain. For example, students described how they built confidence in their interpersonal skills as they worked in teams. They practiced patience while waiting for tools, and discovered how to "read" people and how to trust them. Several students reported their team worked so smoothly they could anticipate what their team-mate needed before they asked for it.

After the Habitat experience, a number of students discussed their personal insights. One student noted that her house painting skills were poor she likened that to adult learners who consider the classroom as a risky experience when they do not have a natural aptitude for the subject matter. Another student recalled how she struggled not to intervene at the Habitat for Humanity site as she watched things go, in her estimation, "horribly wrong" due to lack of adequate planning on the crew leader's part.

While our primary intent was not for students to learn about themselves, perhaps this is always an outcome of learning. The data revealed more student discussion of personal growth and change than shift in beliefs about adult education and its relationship to social change. Moreover, perhaps this is to be expected given that the U.S. society is "individually" oriented. It takes effort to get people thinking about the "collective." Both of us have lived and worked in collective cultures where the collective good takes precedence over the well being of the individual. Perhaps we allowed our personal experiences to influence our hopes and expectations for our students.

Several students spoke of feeling proud of their participation—they felt they accomplished something, it was a fulfilling experience. On the other hand, several students confessed they resented the idea of working at Habitat because they had to sacrifice other, more

leisure oriented, activities. However, they also admitted that “giving back” through this activity made them feel good. For example, Robb noted that he found satisfaction in anonymous service—service where the recipient would never know of his contribution. A couple of students shared that they wished their families could participate in this activity.

### **A Broader Perspective of Adult Education**

Reggie said “when I started this program I had a very limited concept of adult education. Since I have been here, I have learned there are a number of ways for educating adults. . . Every time I do something like this [build with Habitat for Humanity] I realize three or four more ways people can learn...everything seems to be a learning experience if we allow ourselves to take advantage of it.” Students discovered adult education is also problem-posing education. It involves new teacher/student relationships more in line with those described by Freire (2003) who wrote “The teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (p. 80) For example, students encountered problems when attempting to cut siding to fit. Brad observed “we solved problems, ‘cuz none of us really know how to do that [hang siding]...some guys came in and put in a vent. They did not ask us and we had to work around it...spend time cutting that one piece and it broke in half...we had to figure out what to do.” The students became jointly responsible for solving the problem.

Students like Reggie recognized that knowledge emerges from experience as suggested by Lindeman (1926/1961). A broad perspective on adult education shapes the curriculum of masters and doctoral programs. How many of us have experienced graduate school as a series of intellectual exercises based on lectures, readings, and writing papers? A new paradigm for graduate education is emerging in recent years. It is based on Dewey’s progressive philosophy and includes hands on activities and demonstrations. Initially, students questioned the appropriateness of graduate student’s volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. However, when prompted by the instructors (us) they willingly shared their thoughts. We discovered both students and professors take time to adjust to the change. A few years back, in the end-of-semester course evaluation, students harshly criticized being required to do “community service” as part of a graduate course. About the same time, author 2 received the callous comment from a colleague “what does building a house have to do with learning?”

While Reggie admitted his perspective of adult education was limited, Anna confessed “I have never thought about Habitat as an educational experience. I always felt it was an obligation. We have to do community service... It is in our work plan. We must contribute X number of hours to the community. I never looked at it from this perspective.”

The move to community engagement in graduate classes has, in part, followed sociocultural theory (Alfred, 2002; Vygotsky; 1978) in which the focus of learning shifts from individual to the interaction between individual and larger society. The classroom where students first met the Habitat for Humanity representative and heard about the organization was only part of the context for learning. At the building site students worked side-by-side with the homeowner who, by economic criteria, would be considered “lower class.” Students in the study reported here learned under the supervision of a skilled home builder. They also became conscious of how housing patterns in Memphis reflect a long history of race

relations. Sam wrote "I was aware of the neighborhood we were going to be in and assumed the homeowner would be African American."

Building with Habitat for Humanity illustrates Lindeman's notion of adult education. First, it is doing something. Second, it is doing something that makes a difference. Yet, we may not have fully achieved Lindeman's third component "knowing what difference it makes" (p. 82). We may have seen a difference for the individual family who gets a better home but what about the bigger picture? Students reflected on what they had experienced personally rather than what they heard or read. For example, although they "heard" from the guest speaker that Habitat families participated in adult education to learn how to maintain a home and manage household finances, students did not raise these aspects of adult education in their discussion or in their papers. While collaborating to write this paper the authors were forced to look deeper to determine what difference volunteering with Habitat makes.

Adult education benefits society as well as the individual. Habitat for Humanity bridges racial and class differences. Tom, a Memphis student, noted "we were coming together as one group, not focused on cultural differences." These cultural differences include gender as Steve acknowledged when he said "everyone is the same when they are pounding a nail." He was referring to women whose construction skills have begun to earn respect. Several years ago, author 2 noted a very different attitude toward women at the work site. Then, a crew leader, observing a woman about to cut siding with a power saw said "are you sure you can do that?" Today, women's ability to operate tools is less likely to cause concern. Habitat for Humanity strives to implement what Warren (2001) describes as a "commitment to defend local interests while avoiding divisive issues" (p. 44). In addition to benefitting students, citizens in our communities observe the University partnering with outside organizations such as Habitat for Humanity to improve our community and the lives of those who live here. Students in adult education contribute to the University of Memphis' goal of "intellectual, economic, and social advancement of our community (Memphis.edu). Likewise, at the University of South Florida community engagement is a "unique institutional responsibility" included in its strategic plan (Board of Governors Strategic Plan, 2005, p. 2)

## Discussion

Our efforts to have our students view adult education history and philosophy through the lens of Habitat for Humanity was a means to preserve those elements that Cunningham indicates are fading from the adult education field: critical awareness, an interest in the preservation of the voluntarism spirit, and a concern for the collective well-being of society. Although our initial desire to expose the students to the social justice potential in the field of adult education was not realized in dramatic ways, our student's experience with Habitat for Humanity did prompt some reflection on social issues that helped them reexamine their middle-class position within society--a position that many had grown to accept uncritically. Yet, it was troubling that they did not appear to reach the level of suggesting there was anything wrong with the status quo. They seemed to remain at a level where Habitat for Humanity homeowners were families that fell on hard times, or slipped through the cracks or suffered from growing up in a neighborhood with cultural norms that do not support success in the larger society.

Perhaps our goals were too far reaching. We aspired for our students to reach Lindeman's (1926) goal for change. He noted that change only occurs when you do something. "You don't change by listening. You don't change by talking. You actually change when something happens to your muscles. When you step or move in a new way, then the change becomes really significant" (xxix). We had hoped for more responses like Robb's. Robb noted "Taking some type of action to rectify the balance between disparities in people's lives gave me a new paradigm." For Robb this one half-day of volunteering provided him an opportunity to move in a new way. It was not that way for everyone. Claudia from Peru expected the housing and the neighborhood to be much worse based on poverty in her own country. As a result, as much as she enjoyed the volunteer experience, she was not affected as profoundly as Robb. For Lida, from the Czech Republic, the notion of voluntarism was new; in her country, helping your neighbor is simply a part of what everyone does.

Cunningham (1988) lists several principles to guide the practice of adult educators. Two are relevant to our discussion. First, she suggests we should "Be strong proponents of voluntarism, voluntary learning, and voluntary participation in all institutions of society" (p.143). A key theme in her essay is that when adult educators find ways to stimulate critical consciousness they can "contribute to a more equitable, peaceful and just society" (p.144). Let us return to Charles' suggestion for a moment. His suggestion to make the interest-free model of financing homes more widespread seemed to indicate that his critical consciousness had been stimulated. Imagine the effect of such a practice on the 2007/2008 mortgage market in the United States. Such strong advocacy as Cunningham's' and thinking such as Charles' should serve as motivation for us in the field of adult education to continue to pursue ways to engage our students in the community especially those communities that are marginalized. It seems clear that the opportunity for our predominantly middle-class students to engage in situations where they enter neighborhoods and interact with people who are in a different economic class lays the groundwork for important reexamination of their own societal position. As David, a White male student from Florida realized "there but for the grace of God go I."

For social equity to occur, Choules (2007) suggests an analysis of privilege is the starting point and must "be followed by action to transform the unjust situation" (p. 167). When a student expresses awareness of personal privilege, as David did when he said it was "embarrassing to realize that a life of privilege made me think twice about crossing the tracks" it creates a teachable moment for an adult educator to lead a deeper discussion of privilege. Perhaps the focus of adult education should be on the individual in such a way that the learner can determine how to make the needed changes in society. It is the role of the educator to help the individual promote his own agenda "[Adult education] creates educational experiences that empower people to take democratic leadership towards fundamental change" (Highlander, 2007). In the US. this may be the most meaningful way to approach social change because it is less alienating and threatening to students and institutions who are familiar with the individual focus rather than collective.

Cunningham's principle, relevant to our discussion, is that adult educators can promote social justice by "creating constructive critical dialogue with their publics" (1988, p.144). Recall that teaching for social justice provides "opportunities to develop respect for individuals' differences and recognizing how those differences might be informed by individuals' affiliations with particular social groups, such as those based on race, ethnicity, or class" (McDonald, 1999 p. 422). In our estimation teaching social justice is enabled by the adult educators' ability to acknowledge and encourage the presentation of knowledge from nondominant cultures (1988, p. 143). In our courses, we wanted students to recognize



the value of learning from the experience of those who were not academics. We heard examples of students acknowledging the practical expertise of Habitat leaders at the volunteer site. For example, at the Habitat site in Memphis, the most valued knowledge is that of the construction experts. Reggie learned an important safety technique. He commented, "There is always something you can take away from doing things of this sort... I never heard of "fireman's measurement of the ladder...and it makes a lot of sense. I get up on a ladder occasionally and I will use it. . . . That is all stuff that is practical." While working among community members Tom, also a student in Memphis, noted "You learn how to work in teams...to read people...to observe, and Charles told us "it helps you learn to trust the people you are working with." Further we wanted students to examine their beliefs regarding race and class and, as McDonald points out, how these affiliations might inform appreciation for those differences. On this score, although few students acknowledged that race crossed their mind during the HH experience, it was clear that some of our students understood that in the case of Henry, the African American crew leader in Sarasota, race allowed him to be more influential in the African American community than they could be.

During the lunch break Henry (African American) shared his riveting life story of transformation from drug addict to stable husband and father. In fact, his daughter was with him at the Habitat site and the students were able to observe their relationship. Henry had been incarcerated but upon his prison release and wanting to affect change in his home community became involved with a state-funded project repairing the homes of senior citizens unable to do it for themselves. Later, upon moving to Sarasota, he became part of the Habitat crew and has persuaded Habitat Sarasota to incorporate a small project performing a similar service for senior citizens. The graduate students reflected in a very moving way about Henry's abilities in comparison to their own. Specifically, the adult education students theorized that as White people they would not have the credibility that Henry had in the community and that despite the trust-building skills they might have developed, and the college degrees, probably little would change as a result of their efforts. This was a level of reflection and insight we hoped for and yet students seemed comfortable allowing someone like Henry to do this and therefore they were relieved of responsibility.

### **What We learned, What We Will do Differently, and Why**

We expressed earlier in this article our disappointment with the inability of our students to reach our desired level of insight about social justice. However, perhaps we bear some responsibility for this. We may not be asking the proper questions to evoke the insights we hoped for. Triandis (1995) calls us to task in his review of a study on how individualism is generated in the U.S. He shared the following scenario, a Midwestern school teacher asked her students to create a booklet entitled "All about Me." Students filled in each of the following pages: "What I like to eat," "What I like to watch on TV," "What I want for a present," and "Where I want to go on vacation." Collectivists, he notes, would observe there were no pages such as "what are my duties," "what am I expected to do for my mother," "what am I expected to do for my father," "what am I expected to do for my country" (p. 12). The school teacher reminds us that our sense of self is ingrained from youth; therefore, we must make a conscious effort to overcome it if we intend to teach for social justice. We realized that despite our appreciation of collectivist culture as an ideal we had fallen captive to our individualist context and used questions that framed the student's discussion in an air of individualism. Most of the focus group questions (listed under "Data Collection") ask students to think about their individual experience as opposed to how their experience and feelings contribute toward a better community/society. Questions with a collective rather

than individualistic orientation may be more likely to lead students to think critically about the potential for adult education to promote social change. As a result we have now changed the focus group questions in an attempt to help students, and us, move from an "individual" perspective to a more "collective" perspective. Our questions now read as follows:

1. Who benefits and in what ways from Habitat for Humanity?
2. What effect does Habitat for Humanity have on the neighborhood? On the larger community?
3. Can an organization such as Habitat for Humanity contribute to a more equitable, peaceful and just society? If so, how?
4. To which communities do you belong?
5. What are your obligations to each of these communities?
6. Who benefits and in what ways from volunteering?

(Questions 4, 5, and 6 are adapted from an activity designed by Facing History and Ourselves ([www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)). Their work is aimed at getting people to stop being bystanders and step up to the plate.)

Collaboratively writing and revising this article gave us an opportunity to personally reflect more deeply about what we hoped to achieve in our respective courses and how we might help our students question more deeply their role in promoting social justice. One reviewer challenged us to consider: How would we model learning through our own reflection? We decided that one way to do this would be to share with students the old and new focus group questions and to explain why we chose to revise the questions. We considered journaling and writing our own reflective papers but decided that sharing our reflections might silence the students' own thoughts. What follows are our reflective thoughts about our teaching and course design efforts.

### **Author 1**

Once a student accused me of wanting to turn graduate adult education students into social activists. I scoffed and in my mind dismissed him and his opinion as almost ridiculously conservative. However, as I consider my frustrations with student responses in my course I wonder if he might have been correct. My considerations here represent a second round of examining the meaning of why this course is not achieving one of its most significant goals. In our initial manuscript submission although we included some reflection about our learning it was clearly not deep enough from one reviewer's perspective and upon our re-reading, not deep enough to satisfy us either. Really, what had we learned and how should we find out? From a constructionist perspective I have to ask myself if I have reified the potential for a social justice orientation to be learned and whether in fact I am disappointed with my course because learners do not come away with a belly full of passion to change the world or at least a small piece of it. The learners do not all express a desire to run back to volunteer at Habitat. In reflection papers I read guilty feelings about resenting the

sacrificing of a Saturday morning to volunteer. Most students knew how they were supposed to feel towards this activity and so the resentment is always followed by a testament stating how much better they felt after the HH experience.

Three different groups of graduate students have volunteered with me at Habitat. After this extensive opportunity to reflect on my own learning while we compiled our findings, I now realize that I too take a personal (individual) approach to my learning through Habitat. As much as I desire for my students to gain a systemic social justice perspective, it tends not to be what I think about either. I reflect at a very personal level. I learn something about myself as well as my students every time I volunteer. Frequently their insights are deeper than mine. Along these lines, I have also learned that the activity of volunteering as a class seems to create closer relationships among the students. Habitat becomes a common experience that is somewhat anxiety ridden, a little out of their routine, and is unstructured. They become acquainted with each other and me in a different way. I am no longer the instructor but a volunteer taking direction from the crew leader just like them. I have difficulty performing my tasks sometimes more difficulty than they do. I think the dynamics are shifted even beyond Freire's "teacher-of-the-student" and "student-of-the-teacher." We become learners and to the extent that we are able to effectively explore that experience we can each be changed for the better.

## **Author 2**

Students struggle to make connections between their experiential learning activities and possibilities for social change. We realize that often faculty, including us, tend to teach like we were taught--from a rather stand-offish perspective, examining social problems from the safety of our classroom. Frankly, if we want students to get serious about social change, we must show them the way. Loeb's (1999, 2004) writing informs and inspires us as educators to examine our individual potential to contribute to social change. Stories of change that begin with a small step can lead to a more just society. Yet, as representatives of the public universities, is it our role to promote social change? Is it safe? Is it politically correct? Social change is often controversial. What are the implications for an untenured faculty member when she assumes a role that carries potential controversy?

Prior to building with Habitat for Humanity, students in Memphis visit the National Civil Rights Museum. Our visit is aimed at discovering the role of adult education in promoting social change during the Civil Rights Movement. In spite of an authentic experiential learning how adult education was instrumental in creating social change, some students were unable to make similar connections between adult education and other contemporary social problems such as lack of decent, safe, and affordable housing. For those who were able to make connections, will it make any difference? Will it change their behavior? In a previous study (Author 2 in press), a number of former students told me they had continued their participation with either Habitat or another community agency. A few had even engaged their own students or co-workers in community volunteering. My first college experiential learning took place more than 30 years ago. It still affects me today, especially the way I teach. We, and our students, cannot expect to know the full effect of volunteering for Habitat for Humanity at the end of a sixteen-week semester.

Finally we, the authors, can change the way we approach the activity. This study has caused us to examine how deeply "individualism" permeates our teaching. We believe we may be more effective in teaching social justice if we change our orientation to one more closely aligned with "collectivism."

## Conclusion

While some universities may have made progress towards engaging students with the community, many institutions are still striving to reach this goal. We no longer feel alone in our efforts to include experiential learning activities in graduate level classes.

Universities, like ours, have made public commitments to serving their communities. Habitat for Humanity is just one of many opportunities for community engagement; however, many of these opportunities are not at the graduate level. The benefits of building a house with Habitat for Humanity were evident for both our students and for our communities. Students experienced the potential of adult education and a community based organization to enable citizens to improve their lives. Our students experienced various levels of personal growth. Habitat for Humanity accomplished their goals of building homes for families in need and as a result Habitat homeowners have a better place to live. While the foregoing benefits were obvious to us, we see less evidence that student's grasped the concept of social justice. It appears we were less successful in fostering critical awareness of the power of this community based organization to improve society beyond the individual families who would live in the Habitat for Humanity houses. However, what we do know is that community engagement provides opportunities for graduate students to learn cognitively, affectively, and pragmatically. For others who would like to achieve a social justice goal we ask how to do this best in graduate programs?

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