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The Emotional Dimension of Community-Engaged Learning

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STUDENT VOICES

The Emotional Dimension of Community-Engaged Learning

We often think of learning as related to intellectual development alone. The student voices in this issue of *JCES* broaden our thinking to include an emotional dimension. Dania Bogle reflects on how the integration of community engagement enhanced not only the well-being of those she worked with in her project but her own well-being as well. Part of this impact was the experience, inherent to community-engaged work, of sensing how one's *civic* values are broadened when bound with others through meaningful relationships. Being open to new relationships, however, requires being receptive to points of view potentially at odds with one's own and the importance of *civil* values in navigating those differences. Adriana Deras and colleagues reflect on the potential of community engagement to define and then dismantle the empathy walls that insulate us from acknowledging and affirming ways of being, believing, and behaving that characterize worlds outside our own. Together, these reflections suggest that emotional development is a significant part of the intellectual growth we aim to promote through community-engaged projects. Importantly, both of these reflections speak to us from health fields. These voices seem to be saying that emotional nutrition is an essential part of a healthy learning diet.

Where does emotionally-rich learning come from? Community engagement is an immersive experience in social dynamics. At the beginning of the experience, one has to regard and respect

the emotional climate of a community as part of the process of making sense of one's (new) self within it. Emotional climate refers to "sets of emotions or feeling that are shared by groups of individuals implicated in common social structures and processes" (Barbalet, 1995, p. 23). As one continues to become more immersed through participation in the group activity of the community, one gains familiarity with these structures and processes. This heightens the possibility of acceptance within the group. With acceptance comes trust that one's participation in shared tasks will constitute a positive community contribution. This sense of successful interaction among members of a group generates positive emotional energy and can result in "confidence, courage to take action, [and] boldness in taking initiative" (Collins, 2004, p. 39); that is, it leads to learning.

As you read the reflections that follow, pay attention to the interplay between self and other in the case these authors make for community engagement. It is a case for feeling as part of knowing, where the community is best the classroom.

References

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