

The Alleviation of Poverty and the Role of the Community College
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[The following was written based on insights gathered at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching convening of Basic Skills Practitioners and Administrators for the design of a statewide professional development center for the California community college system. February 3, 2008]

Dear Colleagues,

I feel enriched and stimulated by our discussions in the last two days. I want to share with you an insight I had over our time together that may shed some light on the vision/mission/manifesto of our group. This insight came from our various conversations and discussions.

On Friday night while I was surfing the cable channels in my hotel room (I don't have cable so I thought it would be a treat to watch TV) I came upon a scene of a woman police officer pushing in a flimsy door of a seemingly low-priced apartment, the kind that I spent my teenage years living in on north Gary Ave. in Pomona, Calif. The scene had a crying mother with her two children ages about 2 to 4 sitting on the couch wide eyed and attentive. The issue at hand had something to do with a drunken father who had been drinking all day who goes through bouts of wanting to kill himself. He broke something with glass that made him bleed, he beat his wife, and left the premises. The police had him in custody down the street. I turned off the TV at this point.

For me the point of this story is that the two children on the couch, if we and they are lucky, may become Community College students in the future. However, after repeated traumatic experiences like this, will they be prepared for college-level study in its fullness; able to concentrate and focus and see education as relevant to their lives?

Many of my students have symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Cabrillo College's Watsonville campus is in a Norteno neighborhood which makes it difficult for students from Sureno neighborhoods to walk through when they have to come to class at Cabrillo. Norteno and Sureno are Mexican gangs. Indeed, a half hour before my first pilot course a student of mine was cut with a knife in the school parking lot in a scuffle waiting for my class to start. Many of our students experience violence on a regular basis in their neighborhoods, schools and homes. The conditions of their lives go way beyond having to work for a living while they go to school.

The conditions of my basic skill students in Watsonville, who are rural, Latino and pretty much agrarian, may not represent the large majority of students on all 109 college campuses. However, as we have brought the DBA curriculum to inner city Oakland students I found that these basic skill students (mainly African American, Latino and southeast Asian and Pacific Islander) exhibited the same types of post-traumatic stress symptoms. There are other symptoms of growing up in poverty that I have witnessed over my almost six years working with these students (my first pilot was conducted in June of 2002). I find that these symptoms include: having bio-reactions because of their

misinterpretation of the culture of college (the bio-reaction being flight, freeze or appease -- all of which are stress conditions); apathy for school because it was not relevant to the reality they faced in their daily lives at home, and in their neighborhoods; showing up late to class; fear of raising their hands and participating in discussions - they would actually avert their eyes hoping that I would not call on them; having an unrealistic sense of self-efficacy. Most of these students were extremely bright yet they looked at themselves as not being smart. They had emotional scar-tissue based on their previous experiences of education. This scar tissue would reactivate old patterns and feelings of inadequacy even though I did not perceive this inadequacy as a teacher. Many of my students exhibit hyper-vigilance: needing to watch their backs and being alert to danger; and many more symptoms.

I have found that before these students could actually engage in active learning they needed to develop a positive sense of self, a new sense of possibility, and a feeling of safety and sense of caring in the classroom. I call these "the conditions required for learning". I'm not so sure if the definition of Basic Skills that Barbara read at the meeting takes into consideration these realities faced by many, if not the majority, of our students. The definition is from page 4 of the Poppy Copy: Basic skills are those foundation skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and English as a Second Language as well as learning skills and study skills, which are necessary for students to succeed in college-level work. I think this definition may not readily be interpreted to include the "conditions required for learning" described above nor address the symptoms exhibited by these students.

The realities our students live in have a real and negative impact on their success at our colleges. They create conditions in our students brains and bodies that do not allow them to perform at optimal levels and these realities have created within them habits that have been extremely useful for survival in their lives yet hinder their development as successful students of higher-education.

Many of us may feel that "yes this is all true, yet it would take years of counseling or months of non-credit courses to address these learning conditions within our students", let alone the funding that our colleges do not have access to (or is being taken away from as you read this email). This may all be true, but I think there is an alternative way of addressing these issues. However, we have to make a shift in our thinking. We must change our current conception of curriculum, pedagogy, counseling and our approaches to integrated support services that we have seen work, but are expensive and thus not likely to happen at sufficient scale to support and meet the reality of our underprepared students. These students are from poverty stricken environments, which unfortunately are a large portion of our basic skill students of color as well.

Fortunately there has been research published in the last two years on the brain, in particular in brain plasticity and neuro-genesis that has been helpful in designing curriculum to meet the needs of these students. The focus of the curriculum is to create the conditions in the student's nervous system to allow the student to focus, reflect, relax, and trust in an academic classroom context. All of these abilities are required for accelerated learning.

The focus of the Digital Bridge Academy's (DBA) curriculum development effort for the last six years has been threefold: 1. Accelerating basic skills learning (we've just received notice this week from the National Science Foundation that they intend to fund our curriculum development effort to accelerate numeracy and science learning using the DBA's acceleration pedagogical framework), 2. Lighting a fire for learning within our students consistently and repeatably in an immersion two week course, and 3. Developing transformative curriculum and pedagogical approaches for creating "the conditions required for learning" described above, creating exercises that leverage current brain research and a comprehensive behavior system for tracking and giving students feedback on their progress in learning skills critical for professional and academic success.

From the spring of 2002 through the summer of 2003 I was fortunate to receive funding from the Packard and Irvine Foundations to identify curriculum, devise and pilot a course that includes a set of experiential learning exercises that would create within the classroom, student and teacher the learning conditions that support active and accelerated learning. We call this "Light the Fire for Learning" curriculum the DBA Foundation Course. The efficacy of this curriculum has been evaluated and studied. The conclusions are that it works in a consistent and predictable basis in less than two weeks.

In creating the DBA Foundation Course I reviewed over 30 different curriculum approaches and piloted 8 different curricula in five pilots over 1.5 years. Many of the experiential exercises are used to train executive level administrators and managers in very large organizations. While it may sound surprising, it is a fact that we have had over 95% success creating these conditions within students. Evaluation studies have been conducted by Norena Badway, our NSF-funded evaluator on student outcomes and by our UC Santa Cruz evaluators. They studied whether this curriculum could be taught by faculty other than me, and whether it had the same level of efficacy for urban and suburban students as well as African-American and southeast Asian and Pacific Island students. If you are interested in these evaluation studies please request a copy of these reports and I will send them to you.

On another note, a few practitioners and some researchers are beginning to conclude that intensity of programs are key to the success of basic skill students. Brock at PCC has funded evaluations that have concluded that "The more intense and sustained the interventions, the greater the chance that the students will stay at the college and succeed." Intensity goes against the current adage that it is important that vulnerable students take only a few courses to get their feet wet and that we don't want to scare them away by asking too much of them. A hypothesis that we are testing in the DBA is that intensity of program design replaces the need for expensive coaching support services that seem to be required for low intensity approaches like two or three linked course models. It is amazing that the same students I've discussed above who have survived the realities of their lives have the built-in capacity to succeed, thrive and persist given the right environment. They can withstand the sometimes alienating environment of our commuter college design if given the chance to learn in an intense community. These students are survivors, like the green blades of grass forcing themselves through the cracks in the concrete of our urban cities.

I hope at least some of this email speaks to the spirit of our conversations over the last two days. These terribly difficult realities are real for many of our basic skill students, and we have developed successful, cost-effective, sustainable and scalable approaches to addressing these realities. Other practitioners in the room: Brock, Deborah, Myra, Linda Collins, Laura Hope, Rose and many of our colleagues have come upon and utilize many of the practices that meet the needs of these underprepared students of poverty. We are at a time now when we cannot overlook these realities so highly correlated to the failure of many of our students of poverty. We need to address these issues in pedagogy, curriculum, and in the classroom. This summer the DBA Faculty Experiential Learning Institute will have over 60 faculty in attendance. We are finding that there are many faculty who want to meet the needs of these students and are committed to learning how to do it in a sustainable, cost effective way.

Two questions that I'm left with from our conversations are:

- * How do we identify these students in the outreach and enrollment process?
- * How can we systematically capture these student's risk profile for on-going research and outcome evaluation purposes?

We have been addressing both of these questions in the last few years of our work in the DBA.

I look forward to our meeting in April.

Warmly,

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