Amelia Miller

ESA 335 Final Paper

This I Believe...

I believe engaged learning is teaching community goals through personal experiences, by enlisting the social capital of the group to interpret concepts. Peter Block explains a community to “be related to and a part of something” (Block xii). This definition can fit many learning environments. I work at a summer camp. We host children from fourth through twelfth grade for a week at a time throughout the summer. For me, the ideas of engaged learning heavily relate to the methods we use at camp to encourage a community amongst the campers and the staff. Earlier this semester, as a class, we participated in an activity called Zoom. It is a picture order activity, forcing the group to communicate with each other to put the pictures in the correct order. I have used this same activity at camp. In class as well as at camp, this activity brought the natural leaders to the top. The structure of Zoom allows those who have a natural tendency to take the lead a chance to put some problems solving ideas on the table. Then, as facilitators, it is imperative to watch how the rest of the group follows. Who follows in the leader’s footsteps? Who contradicts their ideas? Who says nothing? All of these factors influence the dynamics of the group, ultimately showing the social capital of the people involved. I use this and other similar activities on a daily basis, at camp, to create a cohesion between my campers. This allows them to live and grow together in the community setting of summer camp.
This semester, my group and I thought a lot about enlisting the social capital of our service learning participants. In our planning to work with elementary school students, we wanted to make sure they could relate to our activities. In the first grade class, I led the paper bag mystery activity. As the students worked in groups, reached into the bag, touching each object, to identify it, the natural leaders of the group surfaced. One student heavily relied on his sense of smell. The first thing he touched in the bag was a pine bough. After smelling pine on his hands, he tried to touch everything in the bag, smelling his hand each time in an attempt to identify something else. Other students compared the feeling of the bag’s contents to objects familiar to them.

Though the structure of summer camp and the elementary school classroom of my service learning project are quite different, the same teaching techniques are effective. Ultimately, “we teach who we are.” (Palmer 1). In the formal setting of a classroom or the relaxed atmosphere of summer camp, we must realize our subject matter and understand who our students are. With this in mind, engaged learning follows, both for the teacher and for the students. The gifts of the group can be identified and goals established, and everything else can fall into place. I do not mean to exclude planning and outside circumstances which influence learning, but if we, as educators, value our personal experiences and build upon them in our lessons, we will engage our learners because of our personal connection to the material.

References


Palmer, Parker. The Heart of a Teacher: identity and integrity in teaching.