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Book Review: Classroom Action: Human Rights, Critical Activism, and Community-Based Education

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Keywords

human rights, critical activism, community-based education; droits de la personne, activisme critique, éducation centrée sur la communauté

Heble, A. (Ed.). (2017). *Classroom action: Human rights, critical activism, and community-based education*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Dr. Ajay Heble, professor of English at the University of Guelph, College of Arts, and the editor of *Classroom Action*, presents five student projects involving the study of human rights, critical activism, and community-based education. Case studies are described by former graduate students as part of their interdisciplinary course entitled "Pedagogy, Human Rights, Critical Activism: Education for Social Change". In the introductory remarks, Heble (2017) posits that since democracy is "predicated on the ability of ordinary citizen to become aware of issues in their communities and to develop a sense of responsibility for addressing those issues," (p. 5) educators, therefore, have the ethical responsibility to advance alternative visions and opportunities for social change. Subsequently, authentic community-based learning, which Heble states as being more than traditional civic volunteerism or service learning, may require educational organizations to make significant changes in academic structures and classroom management strategies with the goal of making teaching and learning more purposeful. Essentially, Heble challenges readers to consider meaningful and broader forms of community-based education at the university level. *Classroom action* would involve educators rethinking pedagogical practices and priorities while encouraging students to reflect and act on learning opportunities that promote self-knowledge and social responsibility.

Heble's (2017) democratic appreciation and passion for community issues and alternative ways of seeing educators' roles are artfully described in the comprehensive introduction. Yet, the brilliance of the publication came from the written analysis and reflections of the student writers as they negotiated interpretations of required readings based on the works of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Thomas King, and other social critics. Participants of *Guelph Speaks!*, an anthology of community stories, concluded that "the course inspired us to use our Humanities backgrounds to engage with the community in meaningful ways in the cause of social justice, even as it served to caution us about undertaking such work lightly in the future" (p. 71). Students commented that they were dramatically transformed as related to their project study. Gregory Fenton, in his chapter on a photo-art initiative stated, "I walked away from the semester with a sense that my perception of education, my role as a student, and my understanding of community has been radically shaken" (p. 108). Fenton added that the course allowed him to develop valuable skills and an ethical way of thinking about work and education. Miroki Tong, a performer in a theatre production about mental health problems, commented that "these projects are the trailblazers for something huge in the future" (p. 142). Brendon Arnott's concluding words about his experience in political theatre expressed the change from "passive participation to those of active community members, and always questioning, deconstructing, and challenging power remain integral tasks to the day" (p. 91).

Students' descriptions and analysis of their community-engaged projects and research for social change and justice projects were meticulous and insightful. Although it was apparent that students had many project options, they were held to a standard of submitting a final essay with rigorous requirements showing evidence of extensive reading, critical thinking, and self-evaluation. Their planning and efforts to collaborate with classmates and others revealed the importance of processes and outcomes experienced through tensions and conflicts. Growth was further evidenced by those students who reported continued involvement in social action events or fields of study. Majdi Bou-Matar, participant of *Reflections on Dialogic Theatre for Social*

Change, wrote “the whole work is not just about teaching or performing theory, it is about defining ourselves and re-discovering ourselves as people” (p. 135).

Sharing examples of critical action case studies in higher education classrooms would resonate with students and educators wanting to initiate similar challenges and goals. Heble (2017) asks his students to consider social justice. “Imagine moving beyond the walls of the classroom, and building a relationship between academic work and activism in an effort to make intervention in the broader community” (p. 31). Descriptions of drama, humour, and resolution will capture readers, especially with recognizable Canadian locations. Photographs of the “*Guelph is Skin Deep*” project further supported the artistic initiative exploring citizenship. This reviewer’s modest criticism of the teaching innovation involves reconciling the realities of university course time frames, administrative requirements, fund raising, and student limitations. It is well known that time is a valuable commodity for most graduate students as employment, families, and other responsibilities may compete with academic commitments and extensive community projects. Undoubtedly, understanding and following the concepts of informed consent, vulnerable subjects, minimal risk, and no deception as described by Heble (p. 33) may require prerequisite research or project management courses. Although Heble acknowledges the dilemma of classroom and institutional limitations, he persists in seeing the overarching value of inquiry and community-based education for human rights.

Overall, the publication is intriguing because of students’ perspectives and their honesty in describing the challenges of meeting their personal and course learning goals. Additional and helpful resources for educators include a detailed course outline with schedules, activities, references, and evaluation notes. A comprehensive webography of human rights education is presented which offers another research support option, whether the reader is a student or an educator in higher education. Although the case studies presented are impressive, additional examples of more modest proposals would further support the range of possibilities. *Classroom Action* is an outstanding example and resource tool to trigger innovation in teaching and learning. Heble’s (2017) concluding remarks will inspire educators “to explore and encourage pedagogical initiatives that engage with concerns anchored in the real communities in which we live and work” (p. 146).