

February 2017

Teaching the Mission: Support When It's Messy

Heidi Barker

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Barker, Heidi (2017) "Teaching the Mission: Support When It's Messy," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 51 , Article 28.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol51/iss1/28>

TEACHING THE MISSION

Support When It's Messy

By Heidi Barker

In our work with students, we try to connect theory with practice, engaging the full cycle of Ignatian pedagogy. We ask students to take what they learn in our university courses and weave it with experiences that fully engage with communities and peoples. We ask them to reflect, to take action, to ask more questions, and to begin the cycle again.

As this issue of *Conversations* came together, I considered the types of difficult conversations and topics that come up in my courses. I am a professor of education and my work revolves mainly around preparing students to become teachers. Our students are required to spend time in classrooms engaging with students, engaging with teachers and administrators, engaging with families. Engaging with schools and communities provides some of the most powerful learning experiences that our students encounter. This learning is real. It is hard. And, it is messy. There are often grey areas that are true to the scenarios, strategies, and research we have discussed in our university classrooms, but it is different when it is "real." There are hard questions, hard issues, and hard interactions.

In a recent seminar course, students shared what difficulties they were encountering in their school settings. At one high school, a student had committed suicide. The student teacher was not only consoling and providing support for the students in his classes, he was also mourning the loss. Another of my students, in collaboration with his mentor teacher, completed the mandatory reporting of abuse when they were told by a middle-school student that she had been abused by a relative. Every day in their field placements, my students

"Students, in the course of their formation, must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively."

- Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.,
Superior General of the Society of Jesus.
Keynote Address at Santa Clara
University's Justice Conference,
October 6, 2000

encounter poverty, racism, issues related to immigration, language and culture. They see firsthand the impact of policy on students with disabilities. My undergraduate and graduate students grapple with the ways that educational disparities exist in our communities. Injustice abounds, and it is important for my students to engage with these topics. I have to be ready to give them safe spaces to navigate through this reality.

How do I support students when it is hard, when it is messy? I try to scaffold for them. I try to give them support and help them traverse the gritty, messy world so that they will continue to engage with it. One way I try to provide scaffolding is by giving students a variety of formats to discuss and problem-solve. For example, one student may be paired with another student

who is at the same field site, students may be in "support groups" of students with whom they meet each week to deconstruct and problem-solve together, we do whole class "check-ins" which allow everyone to know how things are going, and students are required to meet with me as a further support. I make sure that we have good communication and relationships with our field sites so that we can also work together as reciprocal partners for our university students and for their school communities.

All of these layers give students different access points for support. This is *cura personalis* in practice. Some feel more comfortable sharing with a partner, some share in the large group, and some only share with their mentors or with me. By providing a variety of different spaces in classes and in experiences for active caring, there is support for learning related to mission. I don't have to know the answers, but I have to be authentic in my caring, in my curiosities, and in my compassion – both for the difficult issues and for my students.

We demand a lot from our students: be a problem solver, be a leader, be an advocate. These are values we share at our Jesuit institutions. We want our students to engage with the world, to be learners becoming leaders, to be men and women in service of others. It is essential for them to become critical thinkers and to work towards solving the problems we discuss, for aren't the only questions worth answering the hard ones?

Heidi Barker is an associate professor and chairperson of the education department in Regis College at Regis University; she is a member of the Conversations seminar.