“Be the Change”: Effective Uses of the Social Action Approach in Higher Education

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What is Social Action?

• Social action is individual or group behavior that involves interaction with other individuals or groups, especially organized action toward social reform.

• Random House Dictionary
The Importance of Social Action

- “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”
  - Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)

- “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”
  - Margaret Mead (1901-1978)
Four Levels of Approaches to Multicultural Education
(James Banks)

• Level 1: Contributions
• Level 2: Additive
• Level 3: Transformation
• Level 4: Social Action Approach
The Social Action Approach

The “Decision-Making and Social Action Approach” = the pinnacle of teaching philosophies, one that encourages students...

“...to make decisions and to take actions related to the concept, issue or problem they have studied...They gather pertinent data, analyze their values and beliefs...Major goals...are to teach students thinking and decision-making skills, to empower them, and to help them acquire a sense of political efficacy” (Banks, 1988; 38).
Two Case Studies, Multiple Connections

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Sociology; Peace, Conflict, and Coexistence Studies
What Social Issues do We Face?

- Human rights
- Gender equity
- Ethnic issues
- Social justice for people with disabilities
- Environmental concerns
Social Action: Big and Small

- Social action in history
- Social action in one’s own community
- Social action and global awareness
Teaching Social Action

- Include **historical background** of social action in US and world history
- Teach and guide **decision-making skills**
- Encourage **empathy with others**
Social Action for Children (K-5)

• What issues are important to children?
• Developmentally appropriate social action education
  – Child-centered learning
  – Connect issues to children’s lives:
    • Bullying and other social issues
    • Local, community-based issues
    • The environment and the future
    • Putting ourselves in others’ shoes
Teaching Social Action: Suggested Activities

• **Doing social action** is very important!

• Integrate **Language Arts**:
  – Gain background through read-alouds, reading passages, websites, films...
  – Written responses / journals
  – Guides for doing good
  – Letters / emails
    • Persuasive letters to government officials, heads of corporations or organizations, etc.
    • Encouragement letters to people going through hard times, people doing something you admire...
    • “Pen pals”
Teaching Social Action: Suggested Activities

• Teaching other students / people about an issue
  – Classroom to classroom / school assembly
  – Create a book or art about a topic and place it in the local and school library

• Building through Habitat for Humanity

• Collecting money, food, etc. for a cause

• Inviting guest speakers
Active Learning:
Helping a NOLA School
Martin Luther King, Jr. Charter School, before and after
I lost my aunt and I miss her.

I lost my house and my family friends my school and my toys and games.
School Supply Drive

• Teacher candidates planned and implemented
• Using our strengths
• Compromising
• Contacting the press; coordinating events
• More than we expected
  – Pen pals
  – Cheerleader connections
• Teacher candidates’ reactions
Digging Deeper

• Higher education in different social contexts
• Social Action Approach across different disciplines
Courses and Critical Thinking

- **War and Possibilities of Peace** (whose title changes in fall 2012 to *Deconstructing War, Building Peace*), focuses on the many aspects of human culture that could be organized differently with an emphasis on building a “peace culture” rather than one characterized by war, competition, and conflict.
  - Analysis and discussion of works by Thoreau, Gandhi, King, and others
  - Critical discussions of currently unfolding subjects like the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, and unions’ rights, connecting current movements for social change with classic thinkers’ works.

- **Sociology of Empowerment**
  - Students discuss “explicitly - what is in your life that allows you to do what you want?”

- **The Sociology of the Israeli-Palestinian Confrontation**
  - Learning to question the standard narratives students may have learned at home and in religious settings and schools
  - Eventually, students often “see their way to seeing complexities.”
Resistance

- Active vs. passive resistance
- Encourage critical thinking through discussion and “Writing to Learn” activities

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<th>Critical Points</th>
<th>Response</th>
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Analysis

Dobrick...Elem. Education  Fellman...Sociology
Planning Your Own Social Action Learning Activity

• *Think:* How can social action be encouraged through your unit of study?  
• *Think:* What social issues are involved?  
• Plan an effective learning activity that...  
  – Has S.M.A.R.T. objectives  
  – Reaches students with multiple learning styles and ability levels.  
  – Meaningfully integrates language arts skills.  
  – Encourages or (better yet) allows students to engage in positive social action.