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Community Projects and the University Curriculum: Re-searching for a Civil Rights History Through Community Photographs

Jan Peterson Roddy & Benita R. VanWinkle

Prologue

The following articles represent a collaborative process, as does the project that we will discuss. It is not within the scope of these articles to engage in an in depth examination of community photography. This practice and it's relationship to high art, cultural production and representation has been the topic of other very interesting investigations.[1] We will instead focus on a possible relationship between community photography and the higher education curriculum, wherein each project facilitates the other. The first article represents my view of the pedagogical foundations of this relationship as the instructor and a participant in this process. The second article will speak from a student/participant's perspective, about the actual process and results of this particular class project .

J.P.R.

An Instructor's Perspective

I believe that where projects that involve students literally in the world around them intersect with the classroom, radical transformative learning can occur. The ideas presented here stem from a particular project assigned in a course I teach at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. The course is a two semester graduate level photo history seminar that is a requirement in our Master of Fine Arts program. The first semester we spend looking critically at the larger category of "history"-- analyzing how it is indeed constructed within particular cultural boundaries, and then deconstructing the traditional canon of photographic history that is near and dear to many of our hearts. At the beginning of the following semester, we select a project to work on that would involve creating a community archive. My only requirement for choosing a subject is that it must deal with a topic or people who are marginalized or rendered invisible by traditional photographic histories.

The goal this group chose for itself was to collect photographs and information from individuals and community stores that in some way evidenced the civil rights era in the Carbondale community from approximately 1965-75. After gathering and organizing the materials we could in the time frame of a semester, we placed one copy in the University Special Collections and another into the hands of a community group as an open resource for further investigation -- rather than as a definitive text.

There are several curricular foundations for working and studying within the community. It is very difficult to deal with people and subject matter that fly in the face of dominant cultural beliefs and institutions without finding yourself, and the institutions in which you participate, called into question as well. One of the primary motivations for choosing a course structure which would expand past traditional boundaries resulted from a critical look at the values reflected in the classroom and the university. I had been all too aware, since my own days as a student, that the content of the vast majority of college level courses are blindly entrenched in an androcentric world view. During most of my educational experience I remember longing for histories

and ideas that reflected a female experience . Later I became aware of the almost criminal exclusionary practices that persist in our curriculum with regards to race. While course content that participates in oppressive and authoritarian ideologies is more readily identifiable than course structure which shares the same roots, the process of recognition and change requires the same ongoing process of sorting through many layers of learning that represent our own years of indoctrination in traditional domination models of education.

There is a particular dynamic involved in the relationship between the university and local community that often goes unchallenged. The public university or college (especially those in rural settings) was originally charged with serving the public by educating the young people of a given area in addition to serving the regional community more directly as a primary informational resource. However, the insulated nature of the university, as well as very real class differences, create barriers between the local and university communities. Students and many faculty members, fail to identify themselves as genuine residents of the local community. As a result, they act as tourists -- taking away pictures of the place and people, but not feeling an obligation to give anything in return. Working with the community through class projects begins to break down barriers between local and university people as well as instill in students a sense of responsibility towards the world they often draw on as a source of images.

The very nature of community work necessarily results in a non-traditional classroom. In the introduction to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull defines the difference between liberation pedagogy and domination pedagogy:

> There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom", the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.[2]

When students begin to deal critically and creatively with their world, the classroom necessarily becomes the site of struggle.[3] Our class was an all white group. While working with the African-American community, its stories and images, we had to struggle with confronting and unlearning our own racism. It is difficult to know just how far we were able to move through this process as a group, since past an initial recognition this transformation is an internal one, different for each individual. We often struggled with reaching a consensus within our group on the many decisions made while attempting to compile a responsible public archive. The readings we had done the previous semester brought students to the realization that historical narratives are culturally constructed. The weight of the responsibility and power attached to this realization was sometimes paralyzing. Even when we shared that responsibility with community members who advised us on images, students seemed to want a more authoritive figure than themselves (me at the very least) to swoop down from the regions of divine infallibility to lift their new burden. We struggled as well with our varied backgrounds and approaches to photographic imagery. It was difficult for many students whose art education had dealt with the photograph as primarily a compilation of formal and design elements, to move into dealing with these images as bearers of cultural codes and meanings. Such struggle is evidence that students are beginning to develop a sense of critical consciousness. The most important learning experiences that occur in my classes are when students learn to think critically and analytically -- not just about photographs, but about the larger world in which they and those images reside.[4] These skills serve students more fully than a simple body of learned knowledge.

In dealing with any student (but particularly MFA students, whose largest number are going to become educators themselves) it is not just what we teach, but how we teach that is important. Paulo Friere outlines the "banking concept" as a strategy of traditional pedagogy in which the student is perceived as an empty receptacle waiting to be filled by the depositor of knowledge, the instructor. He goes on to explain:

> In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.

> Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. 5

While this is certainly not the conscious intent of most educators, it is the paradigm under which our own learning was often orchestrated. We will perpetuate this model, at least in part, unless we undertake an active reassessment of the values that our teaching methods represent. Spontaneous problems continually arise, and are part of the process of working outside of the safety of the controlled classroom. Creating a dialogue by problem-posing can then become an educational strategy which facilitates communication between instructor, student and community members wherein everyone teaches,and is taught at the same time.[6]

The final reason for bringing a project involving community interaction into the curriculum stemmed from the need to actively integrate race and gender into all of my classes. Peggy McIntosh outlines 5 phases of curriculum transformation that occur as a program moves from non-inclusive teaching to an inclusive curriculum. She uses history as an example:

Phase 1: Colorless/womanless history, this is the traditional curriculum based almost solely on the history of white men -- omitting women and people of color.

Phase 2: People of color and women in history where a few examples of exceptional and/or elite people of color and women are added. Traditional views and representations around race and gender and the field itself are not questioned. These first two phases are where most general education courses are still situated.

Phase 3: People of color or women as a problem, anomaly, or absence in history. Raises questions of how the systems of reality were defined in such a way that non-white and female

realities were left out. Categories of analysis and discipline are challenged but it still keeps the power of definition in the hands of the present authorities.

Phase 4: Makes a crucial shift, to people of color and women as history. White privilege is still invisible in the issue focus of Phase 3 in which only disadvantage is acknowledged. While in Phase 4, privilege systems which confer permission on whole groups to dominate, exploit, and be ignorant about others histories are revealed. There may well begin to appear some uncomfortableness or resistance from students in Phase 4 classrooms.

Phase 5: Perhaps yet unthinkable — history will be reconstructed, redefined and transformed to include us all. It will require a complete epistemological transformation as well as a reconstruction of perception and behavior resting in a global or multicultural consciousness.[7]

This sort of radical curriculum transformation is a process, but the time has come for it to be a necessary process across all public education. Community arts projects can help move this transformation beyond theory and into practice. No project or process however, that has real transformation as its goal will be painless. From our consumer culture, to portfolio production in art classrooms to, "publish or perish" attitudes impressed upon untenured faculty by administrators, product is often valued more highly than process. The collaborative model of teaching, which can be very beneficial is extremely challenging as well, for both teacher and student. Acknowledging power within relationships and consciously making new decisions about how to define and act within the teacher/student relationship is often uncharted territory for everyone. Finally there is sometimes a natural resistance from students to what will challenge them the most, both personally and academically. I no longer take this resistance personally or as a negative sign. In fact, I now believe it indicates a vital classroom. Community-based projects have a fundamental role in moving the university curriculum into a dynamic alliance with our contemporary societies.

End Notes

1 See: Su Braden, *Commiting Photography* (London, England: Pluto Press, 1983) Fred Lonidier, "Working With Unions": Kahn and Neumaier, Cultures in Contention (Seattle, WA: The Real Comet Press, 1985).

2 Richard Shaull, from the introduction to: Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1970), p.15.

3 Bell Hooks, *Talking Back* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), p.51.

4 Ibid., p.102.

5 Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1970), pp. 58-59.

6 Ibid., p.67.

7 Peggy McIntosh, "Interactive Phases of Curricular and Personal Re-vision With Regards to Race" (to be published in a book on Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies edited by J. Butler and J. Walter, New York: SUNY Press, 1991).

Attucks High School Faculty—a black high school that was closed in the early 1960s as part of desegregation. At the time black students were assimilated into the white school but black teachers were refused jobs at that same school. A settlement was eventually negotiated by Attucks principal. Source: Louella Davis, retired Attucks teacher

This sister shows how her home was damaged by pig gunfire.

BLACK UNITY NOV. 27, 1970

A Carbondale resident shows evidence of Police gunfire at her home after a "shootout" between Carbondale Police and local Black Panthers who were headquartered in a house in her neighborhood. November 1970, Source: Black Unity Paper.

Rock Hill Baptist Church—a meeting place for activist students who staged non-violent protests to integrate local businesses. Reverend Lenus Turley was pastor and activist leader here until his death in 1969. Source: Mrs. Roosevelt Turley.

Young participant in a breakfast program that was started by local members of The Nation of Islam and modeled after Jesse Jackson's Breadbasket Program. The program served breakfast to over 100 school aged children every Saturday morning with donations from black University faculty and local grocers.

An example of inadequate housing on the northeast side (an african-american neighborhood) of Carbondale before urban renewal. Source: Model Cities.

An "after" example of one of 182 such structures acquired in the urban renewal project "Model Cities". Model Cities was a locally administered urban-renewal project that came about because of local and national civil rights activists' push for affordable housing.

A Student's Perspective

Benita VanWinkle

As a graduate student in the graduate history of photography seminar at Southern Illinois University, I worked with nine other students during the spring semester of 1989 on a project we entitled "Re-Searching for a Civil Rights History Through Community Photographs". After doing some research and discovering that no unified local archive of information on the civil rights movement in the area had been organized, we decided to take on this project for our class. For sixteen weeks, we gathered information through members of the local African-American community by conducting interviews in people's homes, phone calls, visiting churches, and even spending a couple of days at the town black community center with a photo copy stand available to duplicate personal photographs. Various resources such as the local newspaper and university archives were utilized to gain additional information. At the end of the semester, the class recognized a need for someone to work further with the information we had gained. We had not only collected photographs, but also a wealth of knowledge regarding local events and organizations. Our class decided that this preliminary information should form a context that would inform the photographs and be available to future researchers and interested persons. I decided to take on this task.

First I gathered the notes that all of the class members had collected over the four months of research. After reviewing all of these materials, I created fact-based categories that could easily be accessed by a general audience since the foremost purpose of the archive was for local use (not necessarily academic or scholarly research). Categories such as people, places, dates and events, photos or references to photos, organizations, and publications were established. All of this information was transferred to computer disc and cross referenced. This data was printed out to be used as hard copy that would accompany the photographs as well as serving as a file that could be added to in the future.

One question that came up repeatedly in our class discussion was: to what extent were we actually making the photographs themselves documents and/or historical evidence by creating this file? According to Rudolf Arhneim, we (as viewers of photographs) expect to find a certain "documentary value in photographs, and towards this end we ask certain documentary questions.:"Is it authentic? Is it correct? and is it true?"[1]

Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, in their article entitled "Photography, Vision and Representation", point out that the "documentary value of a photograph is not determined solely by Arnheim's questions of authenticity or correctness and truth." They assert that "we can also ask what it means, who made it, for whom was it made and why was it made, and the way it was made." They point out that "these questions are asked of other documents ranging from Minoan warehouse receipts to great works of art. They should be asked of documentary photographs and photographs considered as documents as well."[2]

Taking this criteria into account, it was virtually impossible to assert that each and every photograph that was included in this archive was documentary or historical evidence, that is, that it could be used to prove something or provide evidence for a fact of history. There were times when so little information was available about the origin of the photograph or about the photographer, that it would be foolish of us to conclude that we could know the "whole" truth behind any or all of the images. As individuals and as a class we did attempt to ask ourselves the questions that Snyder and Allen assert are important and researched the information about each photograph, it's originator, and the context in which it was made. Paul Gorman, another student from the class, circulated many of the photographs throughout the African-American nieghborhoods to gain more information from individuals that otherwise might not have been reached. All of that information, as well as our preliminary notes have been included with the photographs. While this project was as complete as we could make it considering the time and resources that were available, we were an all white class from the University compiling someone else's history. We recognized the need for the contents of the file to reflect more of the

community from which it was formed. This is now happening, and I will discuss more about that in a moment.

I would like to describe what it was like to be a part of this process. While the idea to give something back to the local community made sense to me as an individual, at times the process was extremely frustrating. Difficulties arose in trying to access people and information. Trust had to be earned by our group since we were obviously outsiders wanting information about an emotionally charged subject and time. While a good number of the people we contacted were supportive of our work and clearly believed in the importance of having this information in concrete form that could be used by their future generations, they were also cautious because of the traditionally limited investment of the white community (and particularly the student population) in the African-American community. Having only lived in the area for a year and a half I had not established a network of people to readily call upon. The fact that some members of the class had lived in the area for a longer period was a significant help. They were invaluable in terms of knowing people and resources that were available. Another eye opening experience was the fact that information was not available where it would normally be expected to be found. I was assigned to locate information at the local newspaper and at the student press. More often than not, the newspaper files on particular local events would either be missing altogether or parts would be gone. The years 1960-1975 (there was a good deal of student unrest in Carbondale as well as civil rights activities during this time) has obviously been edited leaving only a partial impression of what had actually occured. While this felt very defeating, it also made it more evident to me how important it was to be working on this project. It is easy to depend on public files and printed materials and think that they are unbiased and "correct" and that they record the entire history of a place or event. Unfortunately, this proved to be false. I began to feel like the research we were doing was new ground, something that had not been done before and would be important in the future. In the final analysis, knowing that the material was being given back to the people to which it belonged, not as a final text, but as a starting point or resource for future reference and research made my experience very worth while.

Since our completion of this archive some new work has begun. One copy of the archive is being utilized and added to by the local chapter of the African-American Historical and Genealogical Society. This has led to a developing relationship between this group and the Photography program at the University and they are pursuing collaborative projects for the future.

Another development that occured out of our research will be even larger in scale. Preston Ewing was someone we were led to during our original research. He was an officer of the NAACP and an amateur photographer during the tumultuous Civil Rights struggles in Cairo IL. His personal files of negatives and news clippings is an extremely valuable resource. Grants have been written to create and fund a traveling exhibition of this work which will open at the public school in Cairo. The exhibit will include text from clippings and oral histories. The current graduate photo history seminar is working with him to complete that project.

As a student in this class, I found this method of learning extremely helpful as a tool for going beyond the normal boundaries of a classroom. Not only did this process require an academic knowledge of research methods be utilized, it required that knowledge be interpreted into social skills to obtain information through the community. By sharpening our problem solving abilities we were able to leave something behind that is actually being used by the local community. This project also made a clear case for not assuming that someone else will do the tasks that you think are important. It is not enough to be a passive observer in your own history. As a future educator, I have learned a valuable lesson in involving students personally with their responsibilities to their community and ultimately to themselves.

Endnotes

[1] Joe Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, "Photography, Vision and Representation", *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn, 1975.

[2] Ibid.