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What is This?
Creating a Culture of Possibility: A Case for Engaged Pedagogy

Kimberley F. Curtis

Abstract
How to teach young people about the grave ecological and social crises of our times without crushing their sense of possibility? The author has come to believe that the nature of these crises, together with a widespread weakening of civic and democratic culture, makes it irresponsible to teach young people about “the world as it is” without simultaneously giving them opportunities to develop capacities for collective agency. As increasing numbers of school districts cut civics courses out of the high school curriculum altogether, students bring to their college studies little formal schooling about social change, and almost no practical experience of what it might mean to participate in the cocreation of the world. In short, they come to the overwhelming crises we would teach them about with a very shaky faith that social change is possible. There is an acute need for colleges and universities to innovate engaged pedagogies, creating a culture that cultivates, as one student put it, “the knowledge of where to begin to make a difference.” Here, the author discusses Community Reengagement for Arizona Families, Transitions, and Sustainability, a powerful 3-year-old initiative at Northern Arizona University. Participating students show increased self-confidence, capacity for shared learning, and a strong sense that meaningful change is possible through collective action.

Keywords
engaged pedagogy, civic agency, arts of democracy

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Personal Reflexive Statement

My academic training is in political theory, a field concerned with fundamental questions about the nature of the turbulent domain of political life. Many theorists have a strong activist itch while being simultaneously drawn to philosophical reflection. I consider myself today, after much wrestling, to be a scholar-activist. Well into my academic career, I began work in Durham, North Carolina with the local affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the nation’s oldest grassroots democracy organization. Dedicated to working across fundamental social cleavages of race and class, IAF’s organizing methods have had a deep impact on my vision for engaged pedagogy. Also well into my academic career, I reached a turning point regarding my relationship to global ecological crisis. I found that I could no longer do what Buddhist writer and activist, Joanna Macy calls “bracing”. I could no longer stand to look away, and began to experiment with engaged pedagogies as I taught new courses on ecological crisis and political theory. I also became active in a local watershed association, and today, in my new home in Flagstaff, Arizona, I work with students and community members in a dynamic organization to develop a vibrant, just, and sustainable food system.

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed
I have cast my lot with those
Who, age after age, perversely,
With no extraordinary power,
Reconstitute the world.

Adrienne Rich, “Natural Resources”

How to teach today’s college students about the fearsome challenges before humanity without crushing their sense of possibility, without slamming the door through which every new generation must pass as they rise to the task of world repair? In this action note, I discuss a powerful collaborative venture in engaged pedagogy, called CRAFTS (Community Reengagement for Arizona Families, Transitions, and Sustainability) in answer to these pressing questions. Now in its third year at Northern Arizona University (NAU) which involves students in community-based Action Research Teams CRAFTS involves students in Action Research Teams (ARTs) where they practice and hone the arts of democracy. The impact on these students’ sense of political efficacy and hopefulness is marked.

Freshman Seminar: Inquiry into Sustainability is a challenging class that requires plenty of time and effort in order to reap the greatest benefits. Sustainability is a thought-provoking subject that requires a very wide span of knowledge and understanding across several different fields of study: environmentalism, community activism, ecological
racism, and global economics, to name a few. The class has been compared to “being hit by a bus” because it plunges into countless controversial topics that are often disconcerting and unnerving. Pressing social, economic, and political issues are discussed and meditated on, and the newfound awareness can be both inspiring and overwhelming. With so many demanding concerns at hand, a person might not know where to begin to make a difference . . . that’s where the Action Research Teams come into play.

(First-Year Student, “Inquiry into Sustainability,” Northern Arizona University)

I have come to believe that it is irresponsible to teach young people today about ecological and social crises without simultaneously giving them the opportunity to develop capacities for collective agency. Their need “to make a difference” as they learn about the dimensions and depth of the crises we face is acute. To fail to respond to that need is cruel.

These are strong claims. From wide-ranging conversations with colleagues from many different fields—communications, environmental science, criminal justice, and climate science, to name a few, I know others share them. They have been thrust upon me by my classroom experience. As I write, I close out a Fall semester in which I taught two first-year seminars, both of which examine ecological and social crisis. In one, Inquiry into Sustainability, students participated in a new engaged pedagogy initiative at NAU, devoting 3 hr per week outside the classroom to their ARTs. The other, Power, Justice, Freedom, was a more traditional but also small seminar classroom experience. The contrast between the two groups of students in terms of their attendance, attentiveness to classroom discussion, care and devotion to the readings, ability to synthesize learning throughout the span of the semester, formation of meaningful relationships with one another, and the spiritedness they brought to the topics could not have been greater. Moreover, the self-confidence among students in the engaged pedagogy course, both as learners and as young adults searching for a place in society where they can contribute, grew palpably throughout the semester.

Teacher as Madman

The nature of the moment in which we teach is, I suspect, both like the felt condition of many other times of crisis and radically unlike them. No doubt, as the promise of Reconstruction was crushed, federal troops withdrew from the war-torn South, and the violent old order reorganized and reasserted itself, Black and some White teachers across the South were plunged into deep despair. Did it not feel like the end of the world to indigenous teachers throughout the western hemisphere as their people were enslaved, murdered, exposed to deadly new viruses, children taken to be educated in the conquerors’ ways, lands seized and the lifeways connected to them destroyed? What might it have been like to teach in 1942–43 in Germany and occupied Europe? In many times and in many conditions to introduce young people into the world as it is, to assume responsibility for imparting a sense of belonging to the human home must have felt unbearable. This we share.
However, if we take Hannah Arendt’s (1954) distillation of the existential situation that gives rise to the need for education as our touchstone: to introduce the newcomer to the world that it might be, as all mortal worlds must be, renewed, what we share with other historical moments may be at an end. For “the world” to which we refer is not a specific cultural world or even many. It is the very planetary ecosystems that sustain the conditions of possibility for both human culture writ large and for much of the nonhuman species on earth. The nature of the present in which we take up the challenge of educating the young is in this respect unlike any other moment in our collective experience. Moreover, we face this unprecedented moment (I ask for forgiveness for the mercilessness of proceeding on without pause) of global ecosystem stress at a time when unparalleled global-level corporate powers have substantially captured state structures across the globe, and have created ingenious global governance mechanisms under an ideological veil of (market) freedom. The power formation appears so seamless and so inventive that despite widespread delegitimation at the level of ideology, its “drive towards totality” (Wolin 2004:591) only increases apace.

If we draw our perspective back from the global to the conditions in the United States within which we attempt to educate, we cannot avoid encountering other fundamental dark dynamics well-tracked and chronicled by social scientists and conceptualized by social theorists, all of which contribute to the disabling of the demos. These include the decline in “free spaces” (Boyte and Evans 1992) where people can encounter one another across ideological, class, and other differences and make common cause, the recent meteoric rise in economic inequality (Kochhar, Fry, and Taylor 2011), radical racial resegregation (Kozol 2005), an epidemic of gated communities of increasing variety (Blakely 1997; Vesselino, Cazessus, and Falk 2007), decline of civic associations (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003; Warren 2001), the increasing commercialization of domains of shared life from schools to newborns to seeds (Ritzer 1996), unprecedented viciousness of public life and a rising culture of pleasure around it, and decades of ideological and political assault on governance that has succeeded in shaping a visceral hostility (Connolly 2008) to governance at all levels. Last but certainly not least is the prosecution of a politics of education by policymakers on both sides of the isle “captured” by private foundations whose punitive high stakes testing approach is destroying faith in public education by creating conditions in which teachers cannot teach and students primarily learn how to game the testing system (Ravitch 2011). And this in the midst of a consumption culture that nurtures distracted selves whose perceptual sleepiness is profound.

Observing, studying, and experiencing all of this, those of us in higher education are driven to sound the alarm. We know we must wake our young people from their somnambulism. We marshal our research: facts, figures, charts, bar graphs, studies, and expert colleagues. We must be the bearers of the dark news of our collective condition. Awaken we cry, in varied voices. Look what we are in! Do you not see? There is no time to lose. We all must act now. The time is late. Very late. We become the madman of Nietzsche’s parable (1974:181), lighting our lanterns in the bright of morning, running wildly, truthtellers with illumination unbearable.
And, before we know it, we have introduced students into a darkness so seamless that our efforts perhaps only succeed in deepening their attachment to the many anesthetic forms our culture offers: drinking, drugs, consumerism, conformism, and uncritical patriotism. Alternatively, we drive the more vigorous among them—those with the strength of will to pay attention, to a dark fatalism expressed in the end of semester reflection which follows. This student in *Power Justice Freedom*, the seminar without the engaged pedagogy element, is responding to *Blessed Unrest*, a book we read at the end of the semester, in which author Paul Hawken tells the story of “what is going right on this planet” (2007:4), making visible what he believes is the largest global social movement in history. In this effort to galvanize his reader’s sense of possibility, Hawken details what he characterizes as the almost “biologic” response of millions of people across the globe organizing for the planet and its people, referring to it as the response of “a global immune system” (2007:145). The student responded to the book in this way:

> We humans are not the immune system of the planet, but the cancer of this planet. Never before in this planet’s history has a species so destroyed the planet, and our kind has been here for only a blink of an eye in the scope of our planet’s life. The only cure we can offer for this planet is our self-destruction, because for each day that we continue to give into our greed and destroy our planet, we are moving one step closer to our own destruction. . . Though I wish change were possible, it is unlikely and unfortunately, I believe that the organizations that Mr. Hawken has written about and worked with will be ultimately ineffectual in combating the evils of the corporate cancer that has spread across the globe and is feeding on any healthy planetary flesh that still remains on this earth. In short, we are beyond hope. (First-Year Student, “Power Justice, Freedom,” Northern Arizona University)

**Us and Them**

No teacher hopes or aims for such a response. How to understand it? On one hand, it is part of what necessarily flickers across all spirits young and old alike as we awaken and reawaken to the conditions we are in, and for this reason should never be disavowed or delegitimized. Yet, young people of this generation are far more susceptible to being overwhelmed by this dread sense, dangerous because it can never support “the better angels of our nature” (Lincoln 1861). The broad point I would like to make is sociological and demographic, and it is this. Between college professors aged 45 and over, born between 1941 and 1966, and first-year students today, born in 1993, there is an abyss when it comes to experiences of a public culture where civic agency was widely practiced and whose impact was widely acknowledged. Falling right in the middle of this professorial demographic, I think, for example, of my own engagements and the sense, as I participated in the second wave of the women’s movement, the antinuclear movement, the antiapartheid divestment movement and the sanctuary and solidarity movements, that though we had wins and losses, we were vital members of our world, cocreating
around public contests and possibilities. I think of the excitement of innovating consensus forms of decision making in both small affinity groups and larger state-wide and national fora in the antinuclear movement. Or of the profoundly moving quasi-public spaces created during the consciousness raising period of the women’s movement in which in the wonderful words of Nelle Morton, we were, “hearing each other into speech” (127-8) as we told stories and formed concepts, putting into words experiences which had had “no name.” And this, to identify but a few ways in which I myself and others in these times participated in the powerful experience of cocreating the world.

However dispiriting it is to witness the assault on civic life since the election of Ronald Reagan—from the attack on state policies designed to equalize our condition so that a whole host of citizens are not worn to the bone with multiple low-wage jobs and lack of health insurance, to the radically antidemocratic demonization of government, to the equally radical evisceration of regulatory rules needed to collectively steer the social body toward practices of ecological and social care, we, in contrast to our students, are blown into this present from a past where the promise of change through collective action was undeniably real. And this means that as we look and suffer from what we see today, hopefulness is nonetheless possible, even reasonable, buoyed as we are both by our own experiences of social change and by the wisdom time offers.

Our students have neither. As increasing numbers of districts across the country cut high school civics courses out of the curriculum altogether, students bring to their studies precious little in the way of formal schooling about social change, and almost no practical experience or even spectatorial knowledge of what it might mean to participate in the cocreation of the world. To then ask them to face all that we feel citizens must know about our crisis conditions is cruel.

Under these conditions, there is an acute need for colleges and universities to revise pedagogy by embracing the task of creating hands-on learning around civic agency. Today, students need spaces where they can practice the arts of democracy and sustainability. Moreover, the vision guiding the development of such programs must be deeper and more intense than merely proliferating such opportunities through internships, service learning projects, and so forth. Many of these existing programs offer powerful experiences to individuals. Yet, they are inadequate to the fundamental problem we face, namely a pervasive lack of faith in social change. Our deepest task, as Harry Boyte has so precisely put it, “is to create a culture that allows you to believe that change is possible.” As key nodes in the network of relationships in communities, regions, and ultimately the nation and beyond, institutions of higher education can and must become integral to creating and sustaining such a culture.

And many are rising to this task in promising ways. Today, 240 colleges and universities participate in the American Democracy Project, an initiative launched in 2003 by the American Association of State Colleges and
Universities (AASCU), focused on higher education’s role in preparing young people to become engaged democratic citizens. These efforts rose to a new level last year with the formation of an even larger consortium, the American Commonwealth Partnership (ACP) for Democracy’s Future which, in January 2012 partnered with the White House Office of Public Engagement and the Department of Education to launch a year of activity around democracy, higher education, and civic agency. NAU was invited to showcase our work at the launching event, “White House Civic Engagement and Community Building” and, on January 10, representatives from CRAFTS’ community-based ARTs did so. Creating a culture that cultivates young people’s knowledge of “where to begin to make a difference” is at the centerpiece of our efforts.

**NAU’s Community-Based ARTs: The Design**

In the Fall of 2009, we launched NAU’s engaged pedagogy initiative as a joint endeavor of the Program in Community, Culture, and the Environment, the Master of Arts in Sustainable Communities, the First-Year Seminar Program, and Residential Life. Twenty-three first-year students came to NAU that Fall to live together in the newly created Residential Learning Community called SEED (Sustainable Environments and Engaged Democracy). All SEED students were enrolled in a course, “Democracy, Social Justice, and the Environment.” The readings, structure, and objectives of the course paralleled the first of three required courses for 26 incoming students in the Master of Arts in Sustainable Communities (SUS) Program. A 15-year-old interdisciplinary applied program, SUS is a pioneer in Sustainability Studies; the course is called, “Visions of Good and Sustainable Communities: Self, Other, Community.” In both courses, students critically studied literature on organizing methodologies, including but not limited to that of the nation’s oldest grassroots interfaith network, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF).

As part of their course work, both cohorts of students were also required to join a community-based ART from among seven possibilities (outlined below). Each ART thus consisted of first-year students and graduate students as well as a faculty or staff facilitator. Team members joined with a variety of community partners cocreating relational spaces where students tried on, tested, and developed the skills and practices of community organizing they were studying, and participated in creating the web of work that holds a community of possibility together. The mix of multigenerational teams (ranging from 18 to 70!) and intense and intentional relationship formation with community partners was designed to encourage mentoring of inexperienced by experienced, young by old, and to turn the usual flow of teaching and learning inside out and upside down so that learning was a dynamic and cocreated experience. All students were required to devote 3 hours each week to their ART work.
The ARTs:

*Public achievement*—grassroots democracy education coaching with Killip elementary school students. Situated in one of Flagstaff’s poorest, most diverse neighborhoods, Killip’s overwhelmingly Hispanic and Native students identify issues of public concern to them, then learn how to power map, problem solve, and approach and develop relationships with adults to collectively address the issues they think are in need of public work.

*Weatherization and community building*—working to weatherize homes and cultivate community relationships and capacities in Sunnyside and Southside neighborhoods, two of Flagstaff’s most vibrant, diverse and poor neighborhoods.

*Immigration issues and Northern Arizona interfaith council*—working with a broad-based group to improve understanding, respect, and collaborations that enhance a community of freedom, equality, and engaged democracy between new immigrants and American citizens.

*Water issues and friends of Flagstaff’s future*—working on water scarcity and sustainability in northern Arizona, particularly in relation to developing policy concerning recent corporate efforts to tap into a local aquifer and privatize for purposes of selling bottled water.

*Urban gardening and agriculture with students for sustainable living and urban gardening (SSLUG) and native movements*—working on campus and in the community to promote community gardening, fruit tree planting, and research on traditional agricultural practices. Study and implement modes of organizing these efforts that cultivate broad participation and durable networks.

*Food security and sustainability and Flagstaff foodlink*—in collaboration, assembling a broad and diverse Community Food Task Force to assess Flagstaff food security needs and facilitate policy changes to influence how the local food system impacts health, addresses hunger and food insecurity, and supports an economically viable, socially just, and environmentally sustainable food system.

*Public space on campus for civic engagement, sustainability, issues forums/sustainability CAFÉ!*—working with students in other organizations to research and initiate the creation of a public space/café where students, faculty, and staff regularly meet to discuss pertinent issues, engage speakers, organize deliberation and action.

To prepare for this undertaking, we assembled a diverse facilitator team composed of faculty, recent graduates of the SUS Program, staff, and an AmeriCorps member. Some were directly paid for this work and some were not. This multiage, multirank, and multidisciplinary team met every 2 weeks throughout the semester and became an exciting, generative site of our own educational formation—a “community of practice” in which diverse ages, institutional affiliations, power, and training created
a culture which fed our capacity for creative work together. Both faculty and two other facilitators had extensive training and experience in community organizing through the IAF. Drawing on these experiences, facilitators developed strong relationships with community partners to lay the supporting webwork for each ART, and honed an organizing pedagogy based on the art of public narratives, relational meetings and what Ed Chambers, former executive director of IAF, calls the liturgy of public life: research, evaluation, action (2004:15). Prior experience with grassroots organizing was thus instrumental to the skills we brought to making and sustaining vital relational connections with community partners and to our pedagogy. And it continues to be instrumental to our ongoing cocreation of a culture where dreams of social change do not languish but become concrete and actionable in a community of others deeply connected around issues of our public world.

The first year about 45 students drawn from 3 seminars participated in the ARTs each semester. Having just completed our third year, about 350 students from 18 seminars, plus over a dozen returning students enthused about the work, participated each semester. Our facilitator team has more than tripled, and meets bimonthly to troubleshoot, evaluate, coordinate, and read and discuss short works related to our endeavors. Advanced undergraduates, now veterans of the ARTs and skilled community organizers in their own right, serve as peer teaching assistants (TAs) in the classrooms and peer assistants to Team facilitators, able to shoulder enormous responsibility and filled with enthusiasm to share what they have learned and to continue to challenge themselves. And students and faculty have organized new ARTs. At the close of each semester, we hold the ARTs Symposium where each ART gives a polished public presentation before fellow students, key administrators, and community partners, telling stories about their work and its impact, evaluating what they have learned, fielding questions, and celebrating. The ARTs Symposium is an important event, a key moment where students powerfully grasp what has been building all term: that they are part of something bigger than themselves, and something bigger than their team and community partners. The Symposium helps them realize they speak a shared language about community organizing, relationality, collective agency, and collective possibility, and that that language reaches back into the nation’s history and the histories of other peoples. They realize they are a living part of the culture of democracy.

We have made one important design change since we started. We now tightly tie our first-year seminars to one, at most two, ARTs. This has proven to be vital for several reasons. It has helped enormously with what can be a coordination nightmare, it has enabled us to better hold students in their often disorienting first year of college accountable to the work, and it has allowed professors to more tightly tie their teaching in the classroom to the teaching and learning in the ARTs. This has been for some faculty, myself included, a blast of fresh air in the form of an invitation to pedagogical innovation. After the partial list of tangible accomplishments of the ARTs that follows, I will discuss some of these innovations and students’ reflections on them. All have been spurred by my sense of what is needed, given the crises
we are in, and by the tremendous communities of reflection and action of which I am fortunate to be a part. I will then close this action note with some theoretical considerations and by identifying limitations of my findings that suggest need for further study.

**Tangible Accomplishments, 3 Years Out, a (Very) Partial List**

**Public achievement.** Coached by NAU students, students at Killip raised $600 to buy books of their choice for the school library, gathered and donated 200 can goods to the Flagstaff Family Food Center where many of the students and their families get their evening meal, and spoke powerfully (and successfully) before the school board against ending their school’s year-round scheduler. A second Public Achievement (PA) project at Kinsey Elementary School was opened, and first-grade students successfully got funding for new playground equipment. Another group decided to label key school facilities in multiple languages to make new international students feel welcome. A third PA project focused around climate change opened this year at Kinlani Border-town Dormitory, a residential program for Indigenous High School students.

**Weatherization.** Formed collaborative relationships with neighborhood associations, the City, County, private weatherization firms and nonprofits, and organized two community events, “Warm the Neighborhood, Cool the Planet” to educate low-income residents about the availability of weatherization toolkits, and “Warm the Food, Cool the Planet” where they weatherized the Flagstaff Family Food Center, a local soup kitchen. Participated in a successful effort to persuade the Arizona Corporation Commission to create a $2.7 million revolving loan fund for weatherization projects across the state. Historic victory! Helped raise over $5,000 in a crowd source funding scheme for the solarization of the Murdock Community Center and Community Preschool.

**Immigration.** Conducted interviews with undocumented residents and crafted them into powerful organizing tools. Used these audio interviews in numerous “civic academies” which students designed and held in churches and community organizations to launch discussions over immigration throughout the area. Compiled a toolkit for immigrant families in the wake of SB1070, published a newsletter showcasing the stories of undocumented laborers, and organized community meetings, and First Friday “Empty Bookshelves” displays to engage the public over the banning of Ethnic Studies in Tuscon.

**F3’s AGWA (Action Group for Water Advocacy).** Networked with Food and Water Watch, a national organization, to defeat Nestle and others seeking to bottle Flagstaff’s water for profit. Launched a Take Back the Tap campaign to limit the use of bottled water on campus. Participated in a successful effort to persuade the City of Flagstaff to table a vote on contested use of potable water for snowmaking at Snowbowl Ski Resort.
SSLUG. Organized community seed exchanges, community cold frame workshops, and secured funding to start a campus-wide composting project called *Velo-Composting* dedicated to moving mass amounts of campus waste by carbon neutral means: the bicycle! Helped plant, tend and expand our diverse demonstration garden showing methods and techniques for growing food in high elevation Flagstaff and bringing many dozens of students and University staff into intimate contact with native edible plants, indigenous farming practices, and nonnative cultivars, deepening their sense of place and relationship to the land.

**Flagstaff Foodlink.** With community partners in Foodlink, held over 60 relational meetings with diverse stakeholders across the Flagstaff food system, then formed the Greater Flagstaff Community Food Task Force. Worked with small direct market farmers to update Canyon Country Fresh, an online marketing tool for sustainably grown food in northern Arizona. Mapped apple trees in Flagstaff’s Sunnyside neighborhood contributing to the upcoming “Sunny Cider” community event. Planted seedlings for the Flagstaff Garden Starts Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, and explored and critiqued the local and regional Flagstaff food system through film screenings, education tabling events, and relational meetings with community members.

**Sustainability café.** Formed durable collaborative relationships to gain approval and support for a sustainability café in the new Wellness Center, now up and running as a vibrant public space for engaged students around the ARTs and beyond. Helped foster AMPED (Art, Music, Poetry, and Engaged Democracy), a new ART that will be running an open mic night, doing campus art, slam poetry, music, dance, and much more!

**School gardens ART.** Worked with teachers, parents, volunteers, and K-12 students at four Flagstaff schools to start, extend, and sustain their school gardens, rainwater catchment and composting systems, and seed-saving practices. Taught place-based garden curriculum in the indoor and outdoor classroom. Learned and taught about sustainable growing practices such as intercropping, permaculture design, and integrated pest management.

**Teacher as Cocollaborator in the Creation of Culture**

I have been teaching for 20 years, mostly at a high powered research university where teaching was traditional—and largely neglected as an intentional practice. It has taken several semesters to have some success in transforming my sense of myself from the traditional lonestar lecturer in command of material and learning, to cocollaborator with advanced students, community members, and first-year students in the creation of a culture of mutual learning. As the contrasting teaching experiences I had last Fall to which I alluded above suggest, this is an ongoing process of transformation.
I now consider myself a member of a teaching team composed of peer TAs, ART facilitators, and community partners. This teaching team heads the syllabus with names and contact information. The peer TA is invaluable. I share the space at the front of the room as much as the particular TA is comfortable taking. TA contributions range from raising important issues, to translating what students, or I myself are trying to say into mutually understandable language, to adding zest and a range of youthful reference points into campus life, and beyond that I usually do not possess. And, as passionate, engaged, and skillful students, they model possibility. For their part, facilitators and community members come into the classroom twice during the semester, initially to introduce themselves and discuss the ARTs experience, then to hear students’ midterm presentations evaluating their ART work. I attend at least one ART event in the community per team, and I see it as integral to my work to form close working relationships with facilitators and community partners, relationships that have been growing over the years. Students realize that I know the teaching team intimately, and they see that the whole team is part of the learning and evaluating processes. They see, that while I am the central node, there are other key adults and advanced students there to support them, stimulate them, and help them hold themselves accountable to our semester’s work. They learn to build these relationships. Here is one student writing about her ART facilitator:

One of the things I really appreciated and thought was a strong characteristic of my ART was the ease with which we were able to communicate with our facilitators. It was a very good environment. I felt that my ideas could be heard and had merit and we worked together very well.

Here is another about a key community partner who leads one of the elementary school garden efforts with which the School Garden ART was involved:

Another strength was Norma. . . Norma made working at the garden itself enjoyable, and seeing her happy made me happy. Norma has so little but gives so much; that really affects me more than I can describe.

I have also come to understand how crucial it is, particularly in their first semester of college, for students to form bonds of friendship that support their new lives at college as active learners and powerful participants. The ARTs are key to this relationship formation, and I actively embrace it in the classroom through small group and paired discussions, and by soliciting the stories, insights, questions, and reflections that rise up from their ART experience, and then weaving these into themes from readings and discussions. I try to cultivate a sense of cooperative learning and joy, for which the web of friendships around common public work is crucial. Students write,
[In the ARTs,] students are involved in team building and often develop strong friendships with each other in the process. Creative problem solving and hard work support a different level of connecting that students might not see in the dorms or in other classrooms.

And,

When it comes to participation in class I find it difficult because of the fact that I get nervous. By keeping in mind that I’m just talking in front of my friends rather than a bunch of random people, I can speak more comfortably and not get as nervous.

And again,

In this class I was forced to do many things outside my little comfort zone that ended up being very beneficial in many ways . . . The class size was very small compared to my other classes, and from this and the time we spent together in our ARTs everyone became pretty good friends. Not only was this advantageous for the forming of a community, but it allowed for a place where ideas could flow.

Deep bonds in the class that help form a culture around public work are also nourished as I ask students to wrestle directly with the question of their calling. With the help of the wonderful work of Marshall Ganz (2008), “What is Public Narrative?” I ask students to story themselves in the world. The public narrative assignment invites them to start from the sacred: from their own stories of place, family, history, world; from what they know, and from where they are known.12 Public narratives respond to three crucial questions: what am I called to do, what is my community called to do, and what are we called to do now? I share the strongest narratives, and ask students to reflect, at the close of the semester, on whether and how their public narrative has changed as a consequence of the class. The answers are powerful. Here are three:

The subject matter we have read and discussed in class has opened my eyes to a concept I have never fully believed in: sustainable living . . . I [now] believe this is my calling: to contribute at the individual level in order to practice and promote sustainable living.

People go through many changes in their lives. Daily life is altered by the process of learning, and I notice that mine has changed for the better due to this class and ART that comes with it. My knowledge of the environment and sustainability has expanded drastically, and I now have better understanding of what my purpose might be.

I want to take a large personal role in community organizing and raising awareness on issues of inequality and ecological collapse.

Students also come to see that in this class to learn is not simply to be able to regurgitate facts or ideas from texts or even to be subtle and critical readers of texts. To learn, they realize they must tack back and forth between texts and classroom styles
of learning and skills, on one hand, and the engaged learning styles in the very different contexts of their ART and the skills it cultivates, on the other. I have become very intentional about facilitating that movement. I believe it models what active citizens and all creative people I know excel at. Many students wrote about this tacking movement and its effects. Here is one:

The ARTs went great with the class because of how they integrated what we learned in class with how to enact it in society. One specific example of this is the reading, *Roots for Radicals* by Ed Chambers. The reading discussed working with community members to achieve a greater purpose. A tactic used for this is called “relational meetings”, where one person tries to dig and get at where the other person’s actions and motives come from. We practiced these meetings in class as well as in our ARTs. I was able to have a relational meeting with Elizabeth, one of the facilitators, and it was truly an honor. I was able to see exactly why she is here and how much she cares about working with undergraduates for the betterment of the community.

As this student suggests, I use the classroom space to ask students to practice some of the skills they are studying and putting to real-life use in their ARTs, affirming different styles of learning and the relationship between them.

Finally, as may be clear from the foregoing, I spend a great deal of time in the classroom doing what I learned as a community organizer: evaluating. In myriad forms, we evaluate both our classroom learning and our engaged learning experience. In whole group and sometimes small groups discussions, I question and probe their sense of what they are learning in and out of the classroom, what is significant to them about that learning and why, what is not working well, how they would suggest we work on it, and so on. In some cases, what they suggest is something we decide immediately to implement or further organize around together. In this way, students experience concretely the significance of collective evaluation to their capacity to do consequential public work. And perhaps most fundamentally they are invited into a vital critical conversation through which they experience the always emergent nature of learning.

The precondition for the effectiveness of this kind of evaluation is the authentic sense on the part of faculty that they have something to learn from these conversations, and their ability to demonstrate that to the students. The role of peer mentors here can be powerful. They can, for example, comfortably model bold critique of classroom practice, and thus instigate searching conversation that might otherwise seem too threatening to students to initiate. Short, impromptu and ungraded in-class writing in response to a problem or a question is another method I use, especially in the early weeks, to nurture a culture of critical evaluation. These I can then use to open discussion.

All of this is profoundly invigorating to myself and to students for many reasons, not the least of which is that, in contrast to critical analytical work, it puts us in relations of relative equality, reciprocity and cocreation, helping to create and nourish a
vibrant culture. I believe this contributes to something nearly all students express at the end of the course: that they have learned that social change is possible. Here are their striking voices.

When I first wrote my public narrative, it was within me that things could not be changed. I felt that we are too ingrained in this oil-driven world, economy and personal daily consumption cycles. After finishing our readings and diving more in-depth into many of these things, I feel that the possibility for change is not completely out of the question.

Not just one person can change the world, but if many people work together, change is possible.

I want to be a part of the generation that is in the process of re-engineering our unsustainable systems... Furthermore, I am called to live life in the present with the consciousness of future generations.

Concluding Reflections

The transformation of political consciousness, both moving and measured, that these first-year college students express after their experience in our engaged pedagogy initiative at NAU is a strong confirmation of strategies suggested by some of the most important community organizing theory. Broadly speaking, hopefulness about collective action hinges upon moving from being an isolate: a largely privatized self-governed by the sense that what you say and do matters only in your personal sphere of life and that public action is futile, to becoming a public self with an enlarged sense of belonging, accountability, and shared possibility.

This is not something that occurs naturally, but must be practiced; the self must be educated. To develop, the public self requires what Sara Evans and Harry Boyte refer to as “free spaces,” little “schools of democracy” as de Tocqueville called them, where people can connect and enlarge their particular interests and histories to larger patterns, interests, and values. The ARTs were designed intentionally to be schools of democracy capable of cultivating, in relatively severely privatized young people, their nascent public selves.

The strategies we use to do this are heavily informed by key arguments in the literature, and our success confirms them. As alluded to above, we draw heavily on Harvey Ganz’s work on public narrative. Ganz argues that we must engage each other in “a dialogue of the heart” that helps surface emotions that otherwise paralyze and stymie collective action, emotions like fear, self-doubt, and isolation. The crafted public narrative which answers the three questions: what am I called to do, what are we called to do, and what is the urgency of action now both helps cultivate a public self by connecting what the individual cares about to larger traditions of value (the we), and, when used as a tool of leadership, is intended to emotionally agitate and motivate others to have the courage to act. Both are crucial to a sense of collective possibility.
Further, as important as anything in terms of inspiring hopefulness is the way public narrative and other key organizing strategies solicit others, inviting them to become part of a larger tension-filled world of value, care, and action based upon it. The “relational meeting” was honed by former IAF executive director Ed Chambers. He calls it, “an art form . . . in which one organized spirit goes after another person’s spirit for connection, confrontation, and exchange of talent and energy . . . A good relational meeting wakes somebody up” (Chambers 2004:44). A brief one on one meeting, a good relational meeting also helps people find their moral compass which Chambers defines as something we find in “the tension between the world as it is and the world as it should be” (2004:21-43). Being solicited by others to live in this tension is the key to developing the crucial democratic sense of power: the power to be able to act with others (poder) as opposed to seeking power over them.

Both Ganz and Chambers argue that, as Ganz puts it, “hope is specific.” While big visions of social change are crucial because they embody our most cherished values, hope depends upon finding “winnable issues,” it depends on knowing the difference between, in the language of IAF, “issues” versus “problems” (Chambers 2004:84). Issues, they like to say, are winnable, problems are not. In our work in the ARTs, we consciously and constantly navigate the tension with students between process and project, that is, between the crucial attention to relationships and the need to have tangible victories.

Finally, though this is by no means an exhaustive discussion, key to the transformation of privatized selves into capable and hopeful public beings is developing relationships of accountability and responsibility. This is a powerful point and practice of the IAF, and students express repeatedly that being trusted with important public tasks and being held accountable to the work through intensive evaluation have not only significantly enhanced their sense of their own power, but have also given them direct experiential knowledge of the relationship between accountability and hope.

One area in which our experience in the ARTs offers some expansion of organizing theory arises out of the great diversity of people the ARTs bring into public relationship. As Mark Warren argues in his study of the IAF, their broad-based approach to community organizing self-consciously brings people together across the troubled chasms of race and class to engage in public work. This creation of “bridging social capital” (Warren 2001:98) is something we too self-consciously seek to do as we organize with community partners, ranging from undocumented residents to the Tea Party and beyond. Yet, we also build bridging social capital in an additional way that combats a different form of social group isolation. Creating ARTs among undergraduate and graduate students who develop (sometimes very intensive) relationships with community partners, we bring together people of vastly different ages and thus of skills, worldly experience, and knowledge. Social isolation by age group has intensified as the culture industry has deepened its grip—particularly on young people. This creates a huge, and I believe underrecognized corrosive
demoralization for young and old alike. In building this kind of bridging social capital, we find surprisingly powerful synergies around public work that are an indication of the deeply felt need for intergenerational solidarity. These experiences, in the relational culture of evaluation and action we create, are a crucial if fragile source of hope.

In closing, I would like to point briefly to some of the limitations of the arguments and findings I have presented in this action note. Something that could be studied more carefully is the question of which specific types of activism were most effective in changing students’ attitudes toward social change. Activism in the ARTs varies. Some are more charitable (though none is only charitable in nature), some more educational, and other action forms are explicitly political. All ARTs bring diverse people together, and almost all use similar organizing methods. Yet, it is worth asking whether just about any type of social justice activism that accompanies social justice/change studies and that accomplishes something will generate a sense of hope. Or are there significant differences, and if so, do they have to do with how the change occurs or, alternatively, with the scope and meaning of the specific achievement? How significant is our organizing pedagogy and methodology?

This raises another issue in need of further study and critical analysis. Not all hope is of a piece. How to distinguish between types of hope derived from student activism that are politically well founded, from types that are not? If it is deep social structural changes that are needed in society, hope generated from charitable activism, for example, is unlikely to lead to future action to bring that about. Indeed, it is likely to reinforce the status quo and thus could, over the long haul, be a source of hopelessness.

And finally, what about the duration of the affect? What kinds of student activism are likely to teach students what is needed in order to continue to fuel a spirit of hopefulness? Do some experiences in the ARTs have a more lasting and durable impact on students’ sense of possibility than others? Does our organizing pedagogy sufficiently cultivate in young people the skills to carry forth into their future lives constructive and sustainable forms of activist practice? All of these questions fruitfully call for further work and study. I look forward, in dialogue with others, to taking them on in the coming months and years.

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Notes
1. Best estimates for species extinction rates due to habitat loss have suggested we have entered the highest rate of species extinction in 65 million years. A recent study in *Nature* (He and Hubbel 2011) suggests overestimation of extinction rates are as high as 160 percent, but warn that we may nonetheless be about to enter the sixth mass species extinction in earth’s history. Another recent study (Urban, Tewksbury, and Sheldon 2012) finds that biodiversity loss due to climate change has been underestimated.
2. This is how political theorist Sheldon Wolin (2004) characterizes the central dynamic of political-economic power today which he refers to as “inverted totalitarianism.”
3. This was, of course, Betty Friedan’s provocative formulation, made public in her 1963 pioneering book, *The Feminine Mystique*.
4. The 2012 Report Card of the National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that 30 percent of the nation’s 12th graders were not taught about elections and voting. Moreover, as the Campaign to Promote Civic Education suggests, “Until the 1960s, three courses in civics and government were common in American high schools, and two of them (civics and problems of democracy) explored the role of citizens and encouraged students to discuss current issues. Today those courses are very rare” (National Assessment of Educational Progress 2012).
5. Both the early success of the Occupy movement in changing the public debate over income and wealth inequality, democracy and corporate rights, and its visibility in small towns as in large cities, may be changing this.
6. Quoted from his keynote address to the ARTs Symposium at NAU, December 5, 2011. Boyte is an architect of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship’s public work approach to civic engagement and democracy at the University of Minnesota, and has written numerous books on citizenship, democracy, and community organizing.
7. Since the Spring of 2011 with the launch of The Democracy Commitment, community colleges across the country have also joined this effort to engage students in civic learning and democratic practice.
8. The ACP is being coordinated by Harry Boyte from the Augsburg College.
10. For an extensive discussion of this pedagogy see Kimberley Curtis, “Sustainability, Democracy, Pedagogy: On Locating Ourselves in Dark Times,” in the *Journal of Sustainability Education*.
11. About one-third of first-year students at NAU fail to graduate.
Workers inform Ganz’s teaching about public narrative which he now does at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government.

13. I am indebted to one of the reviewers of this article for raising most of these important and searching questions.

References


**Bio**

Kimberley F. Curtis teaches at Northern Arizona University in the First Year Seminar Program and in the Master of Arts in Sustainable Communities Program, one of the nation’s oldest graduate programs in sustainability studies. She is the author of *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics, and numerous articles*. Her teaching and research are at the intersection of political theory, democracy, engaged pedagogy, and just and sustainable food systems.