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| ARTICLE

## REAL TIME CURRICULUM: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT'S ROLE IN CONTRIBUTING TO THE PUBLIC SQUARE

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### INTRODUCTION

In earlier times, the idealised public square was a democratic meeting place where people

could debate, share, refine, and collaborate on ideas. While this quaint notion of a physical and civil public square



at the heart of a village may be more nostalgia than reality, the recent protests against racial injustice in the United States have demonstrated that the concept of the public square is being redefined into new physical and virtual spaces. With communities riven with natural and manmade challenges such as bushfires, climate change, COVID-19, racial disparities and terrorist attacks, what role can and should educational institutions play in contributing

to the discourse of the public square at such pivotal times?

One answer to this question came in 1905 when University of Wisconsin President Charles Van Hise considered the role of his university with regard to the public square of the state of Wisconsin. He boldly declared that the boundaries of his university extended to the boundaries of the state (University of Wisconsin, 2020). In other words, the campus was the whole state and the teaching and research should occur all over and for the benefit of all residents. His “Wisconsin Idea” clearly established that the purpose of the university was to apply capability and intelligence to solving the contemporary problems of society. To this day, his idea is still front and centre in the University of

Wisconsin’s mission statement.

Van Hise’s inclination was directly aligned with the land grant institution movement in the United States whereby public universities were granted their facilities and status in exchange for a direct application of the knowledge they generated to situations within their states. Practically, this developed into a system of extension offices and agents throughout states with an initial emphasis on improving agriculture. As the country has diversified away from an agrarian economy, the extension offices shifted and now connect universities and community members in other areas such as community development, human development and relationships, health and well-being, natural resources, and positive youth development. Similar to

# FIGURE 1:

## Congressman John Lewis's Components of Civic Engagement

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*Young people today are better prepared and informed than we were. They just need a purpose to rally around. I tell young people that they have a moral obligation to address any wrong that they see.*

these extension offices, units on campuses that focus on community engagement, outreach, and service-learning are quite literally the front lines of community engagement and serve as obvious and ready made ways for universities to engage with the public square. Further, most universities would argue that their research mission involves community engagement by serving constituencies beyond the campus. Thus, at some level, all universities have some type of external interface and place within the public square. So, the question shifts to how are these used to provide students and staff with opportunities to engage with the problems of the day and be full contributors to the conversations in the new public square. To get to that answer, it is informative to envision what an engaged

citizen looks like and then consider the role of educational institutions in helping people develop those attributes and skills. An ultimate example of this was during the community engagement effort of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

### **Bloody Sunday**

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On Sunday, March 7, 1965, over 600 engaged citizens gathered in the small Alabama town of Selma with plans to march 54 miles to the state capitol of Montgomery. The mostly black marchers were responding to the brutal practices of the local sheriff and to a lack of legislatively protected voting rights. Their first landmark was to cross the Alabama River on the highly pitched Edmund Pettus Bridge. As they crested the top of the bridge, they saw an enormous police



force amassed on the other side. The then 20-year-old and future U.S. Congressman John Lewis was at the front of the line. During my conversation with him in 2017, he said that the line of marchers stopped and knelt to pray. They did this for two reasons: to pray for their safety and to demonstrate their shared humanity with the law enforcement officers. Showing unbelievable bravery and conviction, the marchers continued proceeding toward the other side of the bridge. With little warning to or opportunity for the marchers to turn around, the police forces attacked Lewis and the other marchers. He was beaten nearly to death and owes his life to a friend who was able to pull him away to safety. The horror of the carnage was captured on live television and is believed to be a major turning point in the Civil Rights Movement because a majority of Americans were so appalled at what they saw that they began supporting what was to become the progressive legislation of the Voting Rights Act.

After hearing this incredibly moving account of his role in one of the seminal moments of the Civil Rights Movement, I asked Congressman Lewis what would be his message to young people today with regard to engaging with current issues. His response three years ago is incredibly resonant with the demonstrators around the world who are protesting in 2020 against unfair treatment before the law after the deaths of black Americans at the hands of the police. I suggest that it is also a guide for those of us involved in the work of engaging universities with their communities.

Congressman Lewis's advice to young people is compatible with Van Hise's

"Wisconsin Idea" in that both urge there to be a connection between individual action and larger issues. While he did not state it directly, it can be implied that Lewis sees the responsibility of preparing, informing, finding a purpose and determining moral obligations to be beyond the individual, and would include communities and educational institutions. For both Van Hise and Lewis, this necessity to participate and contribute to solving contemporary problems is overarching, and should be the focus of individuals and educational institutions. With this overall concept of engagement, how might its application look in practice with regard to where and how staff and students develop their purposes, prepare for action, and then address any wrongs that they see?

The role of educational institutions in this development was suggested by John Dewey in *Democracy and Education* (1916) through his three hierarchical purposes of educational institutions: stability, focus, and engagement. For me, this naturally lands at the doorstep of community engagement as that's a place where the university's mission and purpose enter the public square. Dewey believed that there is no separation of the educational institution and the public sphere as the two should inform each other with the shared goal of producing empowered participants in democratic society. I witnessed the real time use of Dewey's three purposes during the tragic day of September 11, 2001, and they suggest how educational institutions can use them as a framework for considering how to engage with issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement, COVID-19, gun violence and a terror attack.

## Real time curriculum

Anecdotes of schools' and teachers' responses to unexpected events range from students hearing about President Kennedy's assassination over the intercom in 1963, to teachers quickly proceeding onto prepared lessons after viewing the Challenger explosion in 1986 (because Christa McAuliffe was a teacher on board the shuttle, schools were encouraged to watch the launch with their students), to crisis teams arriving at schools after the Columbine shootings in 1999 and Parkland shootings in 2018. As access to information within schools in particular has increased dramatically since Kennedy's assassination, so too has the potential, and perhaps necessity, for responding to these events within the classroom. In her column after the attacks, journalist Ellen Goodman (2001) quoted David Walsh, founder of the National Institute on Media and the Family: "We wouldn't give a second grader a quadratic equation to solve. But in an information-anywhere-anytime world we have children exposed to quadratic equations of moral information."

Even though an administrator or lecturer should not be expected to serve as a psychologist or therapist, they were faced with a decision about how to respond to the events of September 11th within the educational environment. What role did they fulfill on those days and was instruction influenced by the events? In the "information-anywhere-anytime world" described by Walsh, do administrators and lecturers have the responsibility to guide students in reading and interpreting the media's representation of the world, even when it involves disturbing information?

In describing the influence of the September 11th events on his curriculum, Robert Matheson, a high school principal and teacher in Durham, North Carolina, stated, “I think education is about opportunity, about taking advantage of the world around you. When you have something like this [the terrorists’ attacks], that’s reality. That’s real-life application” (Goldstein, 2001). Matheson echoes John Dewey’s belief that “the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situation in which he [sic] finds himself” (Dworkin, 1959). Likewise, by utilising events of the world as a curriculum, that teacher was also practising the literacy theory of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire: “It is only after they have a firm grasp of their world that they can begin to acquire other knowledge” (Freire and Macedo, 1987).

Because the events on September 11th were so extraordinary, it is likely that many educators of all levels considered employing those theories of Dewey and Freire by using the events as teaching moments. September 11th notwithstanding, educators have always made decisions about using events-influenced curricula in responding to tragedies of the Challenger and Columbine proportion or to more regular current events, such as local and national elections, climate change, or divisiveness in society. It is also true that there are educators who have a more focused view of their teaching scope and do not believe it is their role to incorporate the issues of the day into their classroom.

Sofia Frankowski, a high school social studies teacher in Raleigh, North Carolina

believed that she was responsible for using the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th as a teaching moment: “It’s difficult when something like this happens on such a large scale. But it’s my responsibility to make sure it’s addressed. It’s a moment that will change the history of the United States. I’d feel remiss if I didn’t use this teaching moment” (Hui and Goldstein, 2001). But, how did other educators view their roles in responding to these events? Were her actions of employing an events-influenced curriculum similar to the actions of other educators? Because of my role as a teacher educator at that time, I sought to find out what others did on September 11th.

### **Terrifying Tuesday**

At 8:55 AM on September 11, 2001, I was headed out of my office at North Carolina State University to teach a 9-11 AM class when my wife called and told me about the first plane that had crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City. In vain, I tried to do a quick internet search but it was completely frozen. At that moment we didn’t know what was transpiring but it was firmly on my mind as I met up with my teaching colleague and entered the classroom down the hall. The 24 final-year teacher education students facing us had various levels of knowledge about the plane crash and were also at different levels of anxiety and stress. It was clear that this class wasn’t going to go to plan. My colleague and I quickly determined that focusing on the evolving story would be our class for the day so I ran down to my office and retrieved a portable stereo – hard to believe but at that time we didn’t have the technology

available to tune in to a news broadcast.

We joined the radio news broadcast just after the second plane hit the South Tower and it was immediately clear that these were not accidents. Minutes later, the third plane hit the Pentagon and shortly after that, the fourth and final hijacked plane crashed into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Needless to say, all of us in that classroom were shocked, devastated, and unsure about what was going to happen next. Because our university was located within 10 miles of the North Carolina State Capitol Building, it didn’t seem beyond reason to think that there might be further mayhem targeting prominent places such as that.

While still listening to the news broadcast, my colleague and I went to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and invited students to: a) check in with friends and family members, b) take care of themselves with water, using the restroom, or going outside, and c) determine whether they wanted to stay in class for the remaining hour. After a short amount of time, every student was back in the classroom and wanting to stay together. As these students would be leading their own classrooms in a year, we started a conversation about what they would have done on this morning with their students. Their responses ranged from stability where the teacher would not address the horrific events, to focus where the teacher would allow students to learn about the events and do something immediate to engagement where the teacher would present ways to have a prolonged engagement with the events. In weighing up the different choices, we talked about types of schools, students’ ages, maturity

levels, and the potentially heavy burden of needing to go beyond the normal boundaries of a teacher and toward a counsellor, particularly if engagement was chosen. The discussion with our students led me to wonder what teachers had done on that morning and what might we learn from their reactions for future occasions when events of the public square overtake the classroom.

Following September 11th, I was on the lookout for educators who would be willing to describe what they did on that fateful morning and eventually got the opportunity to hear from two teachers and a principal. It was quite fortunate that they were from three very different schools and had three very different responses. Their responses of stability, focus and engagement hinted toward a connection to John Dewey's three purposes of an educational institution (1916). As illustrated below, the important aspect of these purposes is that they are hierarchical where you must establish stability before providing focus or engagement. Because the third purpose is engagement, it is proposed that these conditions apply to implementing community engagement.

One school was a large (1,000 students) suburban middle school (years 6-8) in a middle to high socio-economic area. The respondent for this school was the principal. He described in detail his decision-making process that morning, which consisted of needing to keep the students of his school safe. He did not believe that it was the job of teachers to deal with the emotional fall out of telling or showing the students what had happened. To control the messaging, he

## FIGURE 2:

### Dewey's Hierarchy of Conditions for Institutional Community Engagement



blocked all outside input to the television screens in every classroom. Further, he had a quick meeting with his leadership team and told them in no uncertain terms that they and their colleagues were not to discuss what was happening until they had a counselling team available the next day. While his decision to bar incoming information might have seemed extreme, he was fulfilling Dewey's first purpose of an educational institution, which is to provide *stability* through a safe, consistent and reliable environment. He was also looking out for his teachers who were probably in a range of emotions themselves and some may not have been confident in performing the role of a counsellor.

The second school was a very small (40 students) rural, Montessori primary and middle school (years 1-8) located in the mountains. Similar to my university classroom, they also did not have a television or way to watch what was happening. During their morning circle time, the news started to come into the school through parents and the teachers. In keeping with the democratic spirit of the school, the teachers told the students about it and asked them what they wanted to do. Like us, they chose to listen to the radio broadcast while they went about their regular morning routines of self-directed work. At their break, the teachers asked the students if they were interested in doing anything special for the afternoon. The students said that they would like to go on their "peace hike" which is a silent walk through the woods to a particular spot. The students said that they would prefer that everyone would consider what to do in response to the morning's events and share that. When the students

got there, they put forth a variety of ideas such as sending origami cranes to people in New York and Washington and raising money for people who lost family members. They worked on both of these projects for the next several days and were proud about their responses. This school's response was similar to Dewey's second purpose of the school, which is to establish *focus* through direct action within the learning environment. Given her comments about the subsequent debates among the students, the step of momentarily taking them out of their physical space during the hike led to understanding and empathy for classmates' opinions. Further, her actions suggest that an activity specifically adapted or created for an unexpected event can be an introductory step toward integrating that event into the classroom.

The third school was a medium (500), urban charter middle school (years 6-8). As a charter school, it had autonomy on how to deliver the state-mandated curriculum. Further adding to its unique character was the location, which was within a museum focused on multi-culturalism. A signature piece of the museum was its large format cinema screen. All of these elements would come together on the day of September 11th and for the rest of the school year. At the beginning of the school day on that morning, teachers were meeting with their homeroom groups. Administrators interrupted the meetings and asked teachers to escort their students to the movie theatre where images larger than life of the plane crashes were being broadcast. After they all witnessed the second tower collapse, one teacher described feeling "kind of stuck" and

as a starting point took her students out of the theatre to discuss what they had just seen (Dewey's first and second purposes of educational institutions – *stability* and *focus*). Both she and the students were in shock and uncertain if there were going to be more attacks. While the rest of the day went back to a regular schedule (*stability*), things shifted dramatically from the next day onward whereby the teachers and students utilised a component of the school's philosophy – inquiry-based learning – to respond to the events. Collectively, they developed a curricular theme, "Looking Thru Lenses", through which students would have the opportunity to look at themselves and other people in terms of personal and national identities (*focus*). This theme would guide all aspects of the curriculum for the rest of the term and resulted in a number of outcomes including engaging with the community by hosting a panel of representatives from different religious affiliations (*engagement*). This example of Dewey's third purpose of educational institutions – *engagement* – was well summed up by one of the teachers who said, "we turned a difficult situation into the curriculum" and is a demonstration of progressing through the conditions of *stability*, *focus*, and *engagement*.

## Conclusion

How does one acquire the moral courage and strength of Congressman Lewis to address the issues of the day and attempt to right wrongs? According to him, the roles of finding your purpose and preparing for action are key elements. As suggested by Van Hise's "Wisconsin Idea" and Dewey's three purposes, educational





John Lewis is beaten by police during the Selma march. (Source: CBS News).

institutions are uniquely positioned for this important work. Within these institutions, community engagement is an ideal approach for addressing the issues of the public square and providing staff and students with opportunities to contribute to the conversation. While it is impossible to predict when events such as September 11, 2001 or George Floyd's death in 2020 will occur, it is important for educators to have a pre-determined sense of how they will respond, which could be a utilisation of Dewey's three purposes. One of the teachers from the charter school that changed its curriculum indicated this need for being prepared for unexpected events with: "teaching about September 11th has to occur before September 11th." Amidst the ongoing challenges such as climate change and social justice and the emerging situations of natural disasters (e.g., bush fires, earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.) and

acts of terrorism, it is clear that community engagement has a role to play through both preparing students to take action and marshalling institutional resources to focus on issues.

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