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Getting Lucky: Lessons from a Lifetime of Making Connections

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I am lucky enough to know I am lucky. When my family was unable to pay helpful attention, schools stepped in to offer recognition and hope for a way out. Somehow I was lucky enough to have the "intelligence" teachers valued. So, despite nine grammar school teachers in five Southern public schools, I learned to value both the process and outcomes of learning. At the same time, I always knew school was easy for me in large part because I desperately needed affirmation somewhere, not because I was "better" than other students — as more elitist teachers tried to make me believe.

In classes I worked to prove this by making friends with the "trouble-makers." I spent time with young people who performed poorly in school but who were much more connected to the world than I ever was. I wasn't brave enough to get into trouble myself. By tutoring and supporting the tough kids, I learned much about the world and found true friends who didn't seem to mind my nerdiness. Somehow, by high school, I was lucky enough to have recognized as valuable what my friends were learning in their jobs outside of school, and even in their overt acting out against their also-nutty families. These lessons were seldom recognized by teachers as useful as "book-learning."

From my friends I also learned the joy that comes from teaching — the exquisite feeling of shared satisfaction when learning and new connections occur. I felt profound pleasure when kids whom I knew were really "smart" began to prove it to teachers. At the same time, I was gaining real respect for the varieties of experiences the world affords, if you let it.

I left high school a committed "future teacher," and at my big public university I soon learned that by continuing my beloved

schooling I could become a college teacher, a job that promised greater opportunities for connectedness. After all, it was the Sixties. The professors I most admired were those involved in civil rights, anti-war, and community struggles. Universities seemed the perfect place to continue linking different kinds of learning — and to make change. Because, although radically disaffected by 1968, I still didn't trust that radical ideas would work for everyone, any more than would other lone theories generated in my precious libraries. Open, engaged learning exchanges seemed the only way to "check out" proposed changes with those who actually needed them.

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Doctoral education at Harvard was first derailed because I couldn't reconcile what I felt was needed to "serve the people" with the definition of a serious intellectual life demanded by such an institution. Forced to choose, I picked the forces that had saved my soul — the communities seeking change, not the "life of the mind." But the choice felt too severe, so I went looking for a place and a "field" where I could again make connections, not draw lines.

One more time, I got lucky. After completing a Brandeis doctorate in social policy, I joined the College of Public and Community Service (CPCS), which was starting up at the University of Massachusetts. This new free-standing college, within a still-new urban university, promised to link community-based "local knowledge" with more academically based expertise. CPCS was outcome-oriented and "competency based," without traditional grading barriers. Faculty and adult students both were rewarded for learning outside the classroom. Since 1977 I have used CPCS' alternative structure, and have consistently found the support, rewards, sympathetic colleagues, and encouragement needed to keep making connections to Boston's low-income and alternative communities.

A few examples of what has been possible illustrate my approach to keeping connected.

Welfare Organizing, Teaching, and Writing

Between graduate schools I was social services coordinator for a parent-controlled Head Start where I learned first-hand the special strengths and obstacles faced by poor mothers who use the welfare system to provide for their families. At CPCS I was pleased to find student welfare mothers. From the beginning, I taught social policy to workers and recipients together, in classes that naturally nurtured

real dialogue "across the boundaries." In 1979, I taught a class on organizing aimed at people with welfare experience. This group of amazing women soon decided both to connect with the statewide advocacy group, and to create their own campus organization. They formed Advocacy for Resources for Modern Survival (ARMS), a group that took on a life of its own, with me running to keep up.

ARMS taught me how to be flexible in combining teaching and learning in the service of community connections. The members, all CPCS students, and I learned through doing: we wrote articles, held forums, lobbied legislators, joined and led demonstrations, and helped each other deal with personal issues. My role grew into that of teacher-advisor-evaluator-mentor and co-learner as the project expanded. When I pulled back to have babies, the group kept going — under the guidance of an original member who had become UMass staff. ARMS now operates more as a support and advocacy organization and less as a learning community, so my role today is more friend and advisor, but I still evaluate students' independent learning based upon their experiences in the group.

During the past decade my connection with the welfare world has been primarily through advocacy, training, and writing, in joint efforts where students are often participants, trainers, lobbyists, writers, speakers, and co-planners of activities. Through such work I have tried to serve as a bridge to make the university a welcoming place for low-income people. As co-founder, with Randy Albelda, of the Academics Working Group on Poverty, I've tried to help academic researchers and graduate students become more involved in activism. We co-sponsored lively, interactive community conferences where academics mixed with workers and low-income people to figure out what's going on with welfare reform — and out of this has grown innumerable training, teaching, and advocacy connections.

In 1997 a colleague, Vicky Steinitz, and I ran a "community class" on poverty organizing in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, with help from grants from the university and the Kellogg Foundation. It combined training, popular education, and academic approaches, with weekly free-standing sessions where community people planned and built together alongside a consistent core of UMass students. We will do this again in the spring of 2000, with a focus on bringing students, community residents, and activists together to explore new organizing strategies targeted particularly toward youth.

Legitimizing Alternative Education

After twenty-two years of keeping my advocacy and community-oriented life connected to my teaching and writing, More than ever I am convinced of the profound value of educational structures that challenge traditional hierarchies and practices. Paulo Friere's work, and that of others in "popular education," help me to use more interactive and non "intellectual" activities in all teaching, in the university, and in the community. I find my teaching at the graduate

and undergraduate level is enhanced in dramatic, interactive ways by my educational experiences with a wide variety of community members: nuns, trade unionists, and professionals.

The power lines blur in such activities. It is easier to bring in learners from the community, who often engage more effectively than do "serious" students. The method helps me to bring professionals and activists into my classrooms— engaging and accessible, they come to play roles, or join in planning sessions, not to give talks and act like academics.

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Building a New School for Women

Currently, I am hoping that a new project, The New School for Women, will continue my lucky streak. The idea comes from several sources: most importantly, from shared frustrations among many women with how higher education institutions inevitably put students on a fast track, and don't — for financial reasons and because of "back-to-basics" pressures — allow them the time to explore options and find themselves. We feel many women view educational programs as places where they can make the changes needed for personal, professional, and social growth, and that a new kind of institution — outside the system, but connected with it — could help them to do so more effectively. So we are creating one where women of all backgrounds can join with others in learning what they need to move on, and where faculty in colleges who seek more engaged connections can find a ready and willing point of contact.

In addition, we are building upon the activities sponsored by women's and community organizations — with their training in leadership development, recovery from abuse, career options, math anxiety, technology, spirituality, etc.— that could be shared with others under an new institutional umbrella, but not one so tight as a traditional credit-conscious university. Finally, we are painfully aware of how much low-income and immigrant women are isolated from opportunities and connections, so that a school which brings them together with other women, all engaged in joint learning projects, will be invaluable.

So my current work is to help begin and document this New School for Women, which will operate, not as an accredited institution, but as an adjunct to local institutions of higher education and area women's organizations — as a place where women can learn from and teach each other. The planning process has, again, involved me in teaching and learning with a wide variety

of others and feels like the correct, next step in my work of making connections.

Rules of Engagement

All this activity emerged naturally from my desire to engage with a wide range of people, and to be in situations were we can learn as mutually as possible. CPCS provided a uniquely nurturing home for my work, but it could have been done elsewhere. Thinking back, I see a few simple "rules of engagement" that may allow other faculty to achieve the benefits, overcome the obstacles, and effectively make connections between their academic life and the world.

1. Start with yourself. Contrary to traditional notions of distance, involvement works best when it is deeply connected with personal passions and concerns — not when it just fulfills a service obligation. Connections happen when there is something deeper underneath than a professional opportunity for field work. Engagement may well be a way to share one's expertise, but that can't be the first connection. Instead, find the associations that may answer your questions about the world: you will find that your "expertise" enhances the relationship, just as everyone else's does.

An important part of being real in the involvement is getting to know others fully enough so that your limits are understandable. You are just a person, after all, and if you've made a real connection to people first, they can hear it if you can't make Saturday morning meetings because of your kid's sports — but you can find someone else (maybe a student) who can.

2. Expect testing. Of course, it still takes time to prove yourself anywhere. You can't walk in and stupidly talk about your personal passions; you have to listen and be open about who you are at the appropriate time. You have to be very aware, and neither defensive nor dismissive, of how your institution is viewed. Know what you can and cannot deliver — no matter how "poor" you see your college, most outsiders consider any institution of higher learning to be resource-rich. And you must expect some people — for personal, class and cultural reasons — never to fully trust your involvement. Just accept this and continue to be trustworthy.

3. Respectful listening is the key. Really listening and clarifying what is desired out of the involvement opens doors and precludes confusion. When people say they want help with "computer skills," for example, keep listening; is it simply Internet access they want, or training for staff, themselves, or their kids, or is it a knowledgeable contact who can be a constant source of connection? It takes time to hear the differences embedded within such responses; they don't come out in a questionnaire.

4. Prepare for barriers but don't overestimate them. Connecting is not something I do if I can, it is something I do because I must, no matter that traditional colleagues may cast doubts. A big help for me was being willing to write about what I was doing, and to include writing in all activities so that I could document what was happening. I wrote with students, I used examples and participants' quotes in my

writing, and I wrote about what I was doing. Writing can also compensate for the gap between one's expertise and the rules of active engagement, where saying what you think isn't always helpful — you can always write more carefully later.

Prepare yourself to argue the case with many colleagues for involvement and non-traditional methods. Accept that this is not the easiest path to success in academia. Community involvement is still marginal to most faculty obligations. You have to be emotionally prepared for skepticism, at best, as you provide examples for change — don't get defensive, just do it.

Even in flexible institutions, time obligations are often the biggest barriers to engagement. Community institutions and professional groups don't operate on semester systems. Sometimes they don't get started on planned projects in time; sometimes the university calendar doesn't allow the flexibility to respond quickly enough to interesting opportunities.

But focusing on the barriers, and trying to plan everything out in minute detail in order to overcome them, can kill the engagement. Flexibility and inventiveness is key, but it usually means you are the one who fills the gaps when a project requires more than planned. Another good reason for making connections around issues you care strongly about, with communities you know or want to know, is that it eases the pain when you are doing the last grunt work.

5. Classrooms are a good place to practice engagement. Finding ways to integrate your community work into the content of more traditional classes helps avoid the feeling of living parallel lives. Treating all students as if they were the equal partners with whom you work in the community will profoundly improve your teaching. It will also protect you from becoming the "professing" professor unable to engage as an equal in the community.

6. You don't have to do it. It isOK to stay in the academy, but then you can't expect to be treated as if you are connected. Those of us who love to be actively engaged with communities shouldn't try to convince everyone to do as we do — some won't, some can't, and it will discredit the entire effort if we try to make them.

Maybe, in the end, we can make our own luck: by finding the best contacts within and outside our institutions; by always assuming connections will help; by being truly useful and available. I began this essay so personally because so much depends upon our ability to acknowledge the human aspects of all this, and not deny them. In the end, what sustains me through the obstacles, and all the hard work, is that same personal joy learned years ago, the pleasure of learning, teaching, and engaging with as many people as possible. It endures. ■

About the Author

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Notes

[1] I have written about ARMS before (with Betty Reid Mandell) in "Keep On Keeping On: Welfare Activism in Massachusetts," in Robert Fisher and Joseph Kling, *Mobilizing the Community.* Los Angeles: Sage, 1993 and in "Not for Lack of Trying: Organizing Against Welfare Reform in Massachusetts 1992-1998" an *Occasional Paper* published by the Center for Women and Politics of the MacCormack Institute, University of Massachusetts, Boston (1999). Dottie Stevens, Betty Reid Mandell, and Claire Cummings wrote about ARMS in tow separate articles in *For Crying Out Loud: Women's Poverty in the United States*, which I co-edited for South End Press in 1996 with Diane Dujon, an original member of the group.

[2] We described the process and outcomes of this class in a special education issue of *The Women's Review of Books*, "Survivors of the System," vol. XVI, No. 5, Feb. 1999.

[3] See Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education As the Practice of Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 1987); David Buckingham (Ed.), *Teaching Populare Culture: Beyond Radical Padagogy*; Maurianne Adams (Ed.), *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Democracy and Education Reader;* Amitava Kumar (Ed.), *Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, and the Public Sphere*; and Maralee Mayberry and Ellen Cronan Rose (Eds.), *Meeting the Challenge: Innovative Feminist Pedagogies in Action.*