

Teaching trouble: Social action and social analysis in the classrooms of two US teachers

Kay Harrison

“The new curriculum requires us to enable students to participate in society and to teach them how to make decisions about social action...”

How do we define responsible social action? What does it feel like when we get it right in the classroom? Will it be safe and predictable? Or, will it feel dangerous and have a life of its own? Exemplifying the conviction that unquestioned answers are more dangerous than unanswered questions, two US teachers, Ron Adams and Bill Bigelow, have some lessons for New Zealand teachers.

I imagine that some teachers of science wistfully hope that perhaps one of their students may contribute to the development of scientific thought, perhaps invent something. I know of art and music teachers who are awed by what they envisage their students will create in the years to come. As a teacher of social studies I dare to hope that one of my students may do the same - in society - that is, perhaps they will dare to propose that an injustice be challenged, or a right be acknowledged. I want my students to do, and be more than I could.

My fear is that the older generation (us) might have it in mind that our job is simply to bring students up to our level, encourage them to vote, take over the reins. If science or music teachers were hampered by that egocentrism what would we have to look forward to but more of the same, the education of generic minds. But how would teaching a Galileo, a Malcolm X, or a young Donna Awatere, have felt? Mustn't their teachers have gasped and worried and doubted?

For some time now I have been searching for approaches which will spark in my students the burning desire to do something (at times -

anything). My colleagues and I tried to build in the possibility for social action in each of our units of work. Students could write (real) urgent action letters for Amnesty International when they studied human rights; they would check their family members' voter registration status when we did government. Real action was linked to their study to promote a sense of their agency in society and to counteract learned helplessness.

Ron Adams' 7th graders, Quincy Massachusetts

One of the issues I had looked at with my class was the story of Iqbal Masih and child labour. They read the story of him being sold into slavery at the age of four, his life chained to a carpet loom, his escape at the age of 10, his role as an activist, and finally, his death, his murder at the age of 12. My class seemed unmoved. Perhaps it was all too unreal and distant from them.

In December 1994 Iqbal visited the United States to receive an award from Reebok. He visited 7th graders at Broad Meadows Middle School in Quincy Massachusetts. One student asked Iqbal what the children in Pakistan thought of America. 'Children are told by the owners that all carpets are bought in America. They don't know what that is. The just know that they buy a lot of carpets in America.'

Jim Cuddy went home after school that day and phoned local carpet stores and asked whether they sold carpets made by children. The next morning in class he told his teacher what he had done and warned 'we might have some



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trouble'. Mr Adams was summoned to the office: one of the merchants had phoned the mayor who phoned the principal. Fortunately Ron Adams had taken the precaution of 'informing and inviting' the mayor before the Iqbal visit and the mayor was supportive of the school and the 7th grader's position.

This was the beginning of five years of campaigning against child labour. The students began with a letter-writing campaign alerting schools across the country, writing to adults they knew, teachers and politicians. They asked people to donate \$12 - the amount Iqbal's father is said to have received for Iqbal's servitude. The children wrote 1,900 letters by hand. (The day I visited Broad Meadows in 1998 a team of young women were writing thank you letters by hand. These activists had not met Iqbal. Somehow they have a passion that moves them to work against the injustice of what happened to Iqbal and continues to happen to children everywhere.)

On 16 April 1995 Iqbal was murdered. His death shocked these young people. They wrote their feelings, of hearing the news and how they turned back to their campaign. They decided to build a school in Iqbal's name in his village. They raised more than \$100,000 and selected a community group to set up and run the school. Their teacher told me he had

preferred the bid of a teacher organisation but the students decided to set aside large international bids in favour of a local group which would be directly accountable to the community. Money was also set aside to establish a micro-credit scheme for the families of children at the school to address the issue that was the immediate cause of the child labour problem. The students have a web site now too: <http://www.digitalrag.com/iqbal/index.html> which means that our students can connect with these young activists.

Behind the scenes, as it were, as all this student-directed learning has occurred, there has been a teacher. I asked Ron Adams what he did to spark this social consciousness and to encourage these young people to become (self-styled) activists. What did he believe about what should be taught in history and social studies? He was obliged, by the prescriptive curriculum, to teach the Bill of Rights. (These 12 year olds were also studying Reconstructions [!] in American history.) Ron uses the Bill (and later the UNDHR) to set up in students' mind ideals of human behaviour. He tells them to look out for situations in which people are not living up to those ideals and that they are not too young to raise their voice.

Ron is a language arts teacher and he is required in the 7th grade to teach young people how to write

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a business letter. He uses that as an opportunity to make a point about learning: "You can write the letter outlined in the textbook exercise (returning faulty merchandise) or you can write a letter that counts." 'How will we know?' his students ask. But when they bring issues up - the absence of women in the texts on World War Two, the gym teacher being inconsistent over hat-wearing, Ron challenges his students: 'What are you going to do about it?' In the first instance his students were responsible for collecting oral history material on women welders in Quincy which is now lodged in the prestigious Harvard-Radcliffe Schlesinger library. The second major issue that captivated years of 7th graders was the child labour campaign.

Awed as I was by these young people, I had some questions. I was concerned that the equation was becoming too simple: things in America are good and in Pakistan they are bad. I found this email on the web site from Melissa: 'Hi! Your story really touched me. I know what a different world Pakistan is from America. I live in New York City where everything is easy (sometimes).' This message (and others like it) prompted me to ask Ron about the use of overseas examples of injustice rather than those at home. I also asked him about the appropriateness of using the Bill of Rights and the Constitution to judge other countries rather than the Universal Declaration. He answered that on both counts it's a place to start. Injustices observed abroad are easier to consider but the lesson is transferable.

The Iqbal campaign is drawing to a close now. Ron Adams wonders where his next class might take him. 'You have to make it really easy for them to take action,' he advised me. Like any fine work by a master craftsman, seams and sweat are not discernible in the

finished product - a classroom of activists making decisions that should cause adults to wince with shame at their inaction.

Bill Bigelow's Global Sweatshop, Portland Oregon

Bill Bigelow, a teacher in Oregon and an editor of Rethinking Schools examined the issue of teaching about child labour in his own classroom. In a thoughtful article last year he detailed the approach he took which ensures that the equation isn't simplified in the rush to action. He began his unit by asking students to write about a soccer ball he brought into class. After their prosaic descriptions he read them Brecht's poem 'A Worker Reads History' and asked them to write again. Bill was making visible the invisible for his students, exploring the deeper social reality that the ball represented.

While Bill had at first thought that he would teach a unit on child labour, which his students would empathise with, he decided to examine its context, the global economy. He describes 'the transnational capital auction' an activity he designed in which students pose as countries and compete to accumulate 'capital friendly points'. Their bids were for minimum wage rates, child labour laws, environmental regulations etc. The activity brings home to students the concept of downward levelling.

Reflecting on this, Bill was concerned that his students would see corporate power as overwhelming and thereby learn helplessness. But he asked them what they could do and was pleased to find that they had constructive proposals. The students' major assignment gave them the chance to do something about what they learned - and they did. Some wrote to inform or to protest; one took up the issue of sports equipment made in sweatshops with his school district's athletic director.

Another concern that Bill had was the importance of not feigning neutrality while not stifling his students' thoughtful consideration

of opposing views. Nor did he want the unit to end up a 'pity' unit and he stresses the need to represent workers as people who resist and are resilient. He is critical of what he describes as self-righteousness in US social discourse and teachers rushing to get their kids out taking action: 'social action can be no better than the social analysis that undergirds it.'

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Conclusion

I was in awe of what the children from Quincy did about Iqbal Masih. Their decision-making was flawless; their actions courageous and effective. Bill Bigelow's students took action too. Most importantly, coupled with the ideals they learned to defend, was social analysis.

These seem to be the lessons from Ron Adams and Bill Bigelow: young people can take meaningful, real social action in the world, and, social analysis is an essential part of the learning that happens when students are connected with the injustice of inequality.

Finally, it is important to mention here a growing dimension in education in the United States today: 'service learning'. Fortunately young people are encouraged (or obliged) to perform acts of service in their communities. This is seen by some as a good lesson in helping those less fortunate and it is true that social consciousness tends to develop as a result of social action rather than causing it. However, it is important to note that it is not linked to social studies or any social analysis and does not result in social

criticism. In other words, students are not learning what is wrong and needs changing; they are learning about a necessary component of their society - the charitable sector. This could be seen as preparing young people to accept and play their part in allowing charity to be the substitute for justice. I am reminded of the words of Freire:

'Pedagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression.'

I hope that we will resist this pedagogy in New Zealand.



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