CHAPTER 15

The Peer Activist Learning Community: A Peer Perspective

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It is no exaggeration to say that we have become radically different persons as we engaged in the Peer Activist Learning Community (PALC). Thus, it is a great joy for us to write about how we transformed our education and ourselves as we created this activist learning community. We each joined PALC for different reasons, as each one of us struggled with different aspects of our college education and future aspirations. We each came from different racial and cultural backgrounds, spoke different languages, and had different ideas about what careers were realistic and worth pursuing. We seemed so different; our ideas, opinions, and values were so divergent that we often doubted, especially in the beginning, if we could ever be a community. However, as we began coming together to talk about our college experiences, our ideals, and our lives, we learned that despite our diversity, we all shared a common struggle to achieve the American dream. At the time, our struggles, especially regarding learning in our college courses, seemed a natural consequence of the price we needed to pay to succeed. What we did not know, or did not want to see, was that our notions of success pretty much meant fitting in with the status quo.

In this reflection we will explain how we came to recognize and liberate ourselves from this conformist burden. Through transformative activist learning in PALC we began to see how the burden of academic achievement in college, requiring competition, individualism, and disconnection from our fellow students, was part and parcel of the burden of adapting to an unjust society. Gradually, all that had seemed the necessary cost to succeed, such as leaving behind “backward” cultures and adopting a professional attitude, was called into question. We began to realize how much we were holding back our critical perspectives, how willing we were to accept our education in order to go with the system, which then began to seem an unbearable cost for our humanity.

Most of us joined PALC either because we were struggling in our courses, due to difficulty learning concepts and mastering academic skills, or because we were pretty lost in terms of our professional paths. Upon entering this project, and for a while after joining PALC, we constructed a narrative about our dissatisfaction with uninspiring professors, bad courses, and incompetent, unmotivated peers. While some members had taken critical courses and had enjoyed
and admired some open-minded, accessible instructors, the overall experience was not radically transformative. Moreover, there was a lot of complaining about intractable life circumstances since many of us had to work in low-wage jobs or deal with family issues. In addition, there were many times when some of us doubted our ability to master academic skills, such as how to write a research paper, because many of us thought of our skills as relatively fixed or irrelevant for the jobs we envisioned. Sometimes it just seemed that our peers were passive and lazy, incapable of negotiating mundane tasks with their instructors. At other times the professors seemed unreasonable, incompetent, or unavailable. As a great deal of the things around us seemed impossible to change, many of us felt a sense of resignation to the status quo of our education. This was reinforced by our prejudices about community colleges, and many of us also tended to regard community college students with contempt. Since for many of us (though not all) the primary goal was to transfer to a four-year school as soon as possible, the community college was a transitional place. We did not care to connect or engage with the campus community.

As we continued sharing our struggles and discussing our future aspirations, it became clear that while each of us tried to deal with our struggles individually, these were not isolated but actually collective issues. With the guidance of the group leaders and through critical concepts and theories we began questioning why learning, or studying was, for so many of us only for short-term goals, such as tests and exams. Or, in contrast, how come so many of us felt the opposite, that the development of academic skills was a matter of individualistic upward mobility. The upshot of these discussions was that they opened us to interrogating educational practices, including curricular and pedagogical issues, which led us to read about critical theories of education. Soon, the oppressive nature of the educational system became clear, including the way classes were conducted and course curriculum organized, the pursuit of education for sheer upward mobility, and social inequalities and injustice at large.

It was in this context that we began to engage in critical-theoretical learning in earnest. This was transformative because many of us never really thought of academic concepts and theories as relevant or as having transformational effects in our lives and society. Embracing critical theories helped us become aware of our oppression while equipping us with the language and tools to articulate and critique our current situations and past experiences. One of us recalls the liberating effect upon reading Freire for the first time and his critique of the banking concept of education. Freire revealed to us how alienating traditional teaching practices are, as they aim to produce docile students, which some of us had internalized. Through critical theories we began to question our preconceived assumptions and moved away from our individualistic,