As a student teacher in 1972, I remember hearing about a time in the “dark ages” when teachers were all expected to be on the same page of the same text, at the same time. I was aghast! How stifling that would be! But these days when I go into schools, I feel as if I am in a time warp as I see teachers expected to march their students all toward the same page of the same text at the same time, regardless of students’ interests. I am told that this approach guards against teaching to low expectations. I see things quite differently, however. I will show how and why by sharing stories about the power of connecting academics with real issues of concern to young people. When done well, such connection not only prompts academic growth, but also enables young people to see themselves as active agents who can appropriate academics for their own purposes.

Teaching Boldly: My Roots

Many of my childhood teachers used creative, student-centered approaches in which they embedded college-preparatory academic skills in interesting projects. I saw my task as a student teacher in the early 1970s as figuring out how to replicate that kind of inspiring, student-centered teaching in an inner-city high school, where I found that teaching meant covering the textbook. As I helped students,
could see that textbook-driven teaching bored them. So, when it came time for me to take the class, I rather spontaneously invited the students to help me organize a unit around a topic of interest to them (they chose “Women’s Liberation”), then collaborate with me in planning their learning activities for that unit. Students who had previously slept through class came alive.

At the time, I did not know how to embed academic skills in such teaching, and it took me a couple of years to shed what I later realized were low academic expectations for students from low-income homes. However, through this early experience, I saw clearly the power of engaging students’ questions and interests, a lesson that has guided my teaching ever since. During the late 1990s, I began to document what academically strong multicultural teaching looks like in practice by following teachers who had completed my multicultural curriculum design course into the classroom. By 2001, this documentation had shifted to focus on how teachers who are committed to such teaching navigate controls over their work in standards-based and test-driven contexts (Sleeter, 2005). Below, I will describe two of the teachers I became acquainted with in California, then a project with a similar focus in Arizona.

**Kathy: Teaching Boldly in First Grade**

“If I refuse to take a position on something I consider to be harmful to children, I am contributing to that harm.” (Kathy, in Sleeter, 2005, p. 111)

Kathy had been teaching for over twenty years in California when I met her. Kathy’s students were all of Mexican descent, many having recently emigrated; all were from low-income homes. As a bilingual teacher, Kathy taught much of the day in Spanish so her students would have access to grade-level curriculum; she also explicitly taught students English. Kathy is White and had grown up mainly on a farm in Ohio, but had lived several years in Mexico where she became fluent in Spanish. Her current residence was near the school in which she taught. Like that of the students’ parents, who strongly desired that their children gain a good education in order to have a better future, Kathy’s vision for students’ learning was ambitious. She wanted them to become “hungry for books. I don’t want them to think of reading as using the...text and workbooks. I want them to be able to apply their abilities to analyze, to question, to figure out meanings in text...to be able to draw parallels between nature and their lives, and between one book and another” (Sleeter, 2005, p.111).

Three features of Kathy’s teaching caught my attention: her use of class meetings as a tool for teaching students to work on real problems, her ability to build academic learning on students’ everyday knowledge, and her interest in raising their political awareness about social issues. Class meetings regularly provided a space in which student concerns led the agenda, and students took charge of problem-solving. Kathy explained, “I figure if kids learn to resolve problems at this level, they’re a lot more likely to resolve them later. And I’ve been amazed at their problem solving abilities and their compassion” (Sleeter, 2005, p. 112). Many problems students brought to class were interpersonal, but some were political. Kathy explained that children regularly hear adults discuss political issues at home and want to know more:

Last fall when on the ballot there was the tax to keep [the county hospital] open, one of my children brought that up in class and we talked about it...This one little girl said, Yeah, everybody has to go vote or they’re going to close the hospital, and there won’t be any place left to go. We talked about that. She’s heard her parents, and aunts and uncles discussing it. The war in Iraq. A year ago one of the kids brought in a picture of the soldiers from Salinas that had appeared in the paper, soldiers from Salinas that were serving in Iraq. And so we talked about it. (Sleeter, 2005, p. 113)

Class meetings served as a basis for student-centered teaching Kathy used during the rest of the day, and as a venue for getting to know her students’ interests and concerns.

Kathy designed and taught an interdisciplinary thematic unit on Monterey County agriculture, which she mapped carefully against the first-grade curriculum standards for reading/language arts, math and science, and her English Language Development text. She credited her principal for giving her freedom to construct a thematic curriculum as long as it met state standards. She showed me a copy of the first grade standards on which she annotated how various portions of the unit addressed specific standards, so that she would be able to explain the relationship if called on to do so.

Kathy developed this unit because “agriculture directly affects the lives of my students. Out of my twenty students, most have at least one parent who is employed in agriculture or an agriculture-related industry such as vegetable packing. The parents’ income and work schedules are determined by the crops and the large companies which grow them” (Sleeter, 2005, p.112). She wanted the children to learn more about their parents’ work, not to become agricultural workers themselves, but to respect the work their parents do. Having grown up on a farm herself, she believed that everyone should know where food comes from, and situate that knowledge within a vision of environmentally sustainable farms that ordinary people can afford. She was deeply concerned about “the conflict between what agriculture has become in this country and what it can be.” Increasingly, large corporations control agriculture, and
Christi: Teaching Boldly in High School

"Are [students] developing in their knowledge of the subject, and also their heart knowledge? Do they have insights?" (Christi, in Sleeter, 2005, p. 76).

Christi, a tall blond with blue eyes, had been teaching high school English for seven years. She grew up in a working-class, racially diverse community where she had become very interested in cultural differences. Going through school, she hung out with different groups; she commented to me that, "You could start a conversation with somebody or a friendship with somebody that just changes your whole point of view" (Sleeter, 2005, p. 52). The school in which she was teaching served the community where she grew up, as well as an adjacent affluent, White community.

What caught my attention was Christi's efforts, as a White teacher, to engage a diverse class of students in probing issues related to racism, ethnocentrism, and exclusion in the context of standards-based English. She told me that she "could not tolerate the racism" she found in the White community, and was concerned about its impact on young people. Since California is experiencing large waves of immigration, Christi cared passionately that her students develop empathy rather than hostility toward newcomers as well as people who are already here, commenting that her "passion is contagious" (Sleeter, 2005, p. 146).

Christi designed and taught a unit on West Coast immigration. As she described it, the unit's main themes included:

- respect for other cultures,
- understanding of our multicultural region, historical perspectives of our immigrant nation, family bonds, identity and culture and the American high school experience. I see the entire unit as a vehicle to assist students in gaining a better grasp about its impact on young people. Since California is experiencing large waves of immigration, Christi cared passionately that her students develop empathy rather than hostility toward newcomers as well as people who are already here, commenting that her "passion is contagious" (Sleeter, 2005, p. 146).

As Kathy had done, Christi figured out how to connect the unit with the state's English Language Arts curriculum standards, which focused largely on reading comprehension of grade-level text, and skill in writing in various genres, using English language conventions appropriately. She was equally interested in both developing students' writing and the substance of what they wrote about. She explained: "I think that if you ponder and research any book/topic/lesson long enough you can teach it from a multicultural/activist perspective" (Sleeter, 2005, p. 51).

Her West Coast immigration unit included three major writing assignments: a narrative written from the point of view of a fictitious adolescent immigrant, a fictitious diary the immigrant might write about four days of school, and a poem...
in which the fictitious immigrant expresses feelings. Christi had students analyze samples of writing to identify mood and tone, point of view, and sensory detail and imagery, then practice expanding their own use of detail words in descriptions. The unit also included a research project in which small groups of students collaboratively wrote short research papers about West Coast immigrant groups to provide background for the other writing assignments. As a culminating project, students created a webpage that synthesized their work. Christi posted her entire unit on the Internet to make it available to students. There she described its overall rationale, mapped the learning outcomes against state content standards, described the various assignments students would be doing and evaluation rubrics for each, and posted notes for each day that included handouts, homework, and readings.

Christi drew from her textbook to the extent that it fit the unit, but she also actively sought additional resources. She extensively used short stories and videos, such as El Norte (featuring Mexican and Central American immigrants) and A Dollar a Day, Ten Cents a Dance (featuring Filipino immigrants). When asked where she found her rich pool of resources, Christi explained that she had become very good at scavenging.

Sometimes things just drop into my lap, and like, Wow!...I've actually been collecting over the last seven years, because, you know, I've always wanted to do something like this...So, I dedicated myself to just grabbing everything that I could, you know...I ended up with a lot of stuff, a lot of stuff! I mean, (pointing to a corner) these are just some of the huge file cabinets full of things. (Sleeter, 2005, p. 164)

I visited one day when the class was reading “On the Other Side of the War” by Elizabeth Gordon (1990), who was born in Vietnam to a Vietnamese mother and an Anglo American father, then grew up in Tennessee after the Vietnam War. Christi led a discussion about the story that focused on both the author's experiences and bi-racial identity, as well as how she constructed the narrative and used figurative language. Some of the White students were puzzled by Gordon's struggles around a bi-racial identity, asking questions such as why schools have students check a box indicating race. This discussion was followed by a clip from the film Lakota Woman that focused on Mary Crow Dog's experiences in a mission school, particularly the school's efforts to strip Indian youth of their identities, and various ways the youth resisted. Students rearranged their chairs so they could see clearly; they seemed very engrossed. The bell rang signaling the end of class before students were able to discuss the video that day, but later Christi commented that narrative stories, and particularly film, drew in students who were struggling with concepts like racism.

To teach boldly, Christi structured a unit around experiences of ethnically and culturally diverse adolescents, then designed various writing and discussion activities to engage students with ideas related to immigration, race, and ethnicity. She carefully connected the entire unit to the grade-level English Language Arts standards to make sure it was as academically sound as it was intellectually and emotionally engaging. Speaking about how one of the White male students reacted to the stories and videos, she remarked, “It seems like it engages them, it pulls them in, even if they don't want to be pulled in. And he doesn't want to be pulled in, and it's still, it sort of grabs him once in a while” (Sleeter, 2005, p 77).

“Critically Compassionate Intellectualism”: Teaching Boldly for Social Justice

“It is in our best interest to transform the education of our people so that our blood is no longer used to grease the wheels of global capitalist greed.” (Cammarota & Romero, 2006, p. 23)

In 1996 in Tucson, Arizona, a group of concerned Mexican American citizens petitioned the district's governing board for a Mexican American studies curriculum. Two years later, the board approved funding for it, and Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) Mexican American/Raza Studies was launched. I became acquainted with the work of the department in 2005, when I was invited to address the annual Raza Studies Summer Institute. What continued to catch my attention has been its unwavering vision of education reform, and its powerful impact on students. Readers may be aware that the state of Arizona's ban on ethnic studies was directed specifically at this program. As of this writing, the program has been disbanded and its teachers and students distributed among other programs; for this reason, I describe it here in the past tense. But the legitimacy of the state law banning ethnic studies, as well as of the district's decision to dismantle the program, is still being actively contested.

Since 1998 when it was first created, the Mexican American/Raza Studies Department worked with schools to strengthen teaching and learning, using Chicano studies' intellectual frameworks. Over time, the department developed a rich array of curriculum resources for classroom use from kindergarten through high school, which align with the state curriculum standards.

In 2003, a Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) was begun in one of the Raza Studies high schools. Initially, three Latino educators (a high school teacher, the director of the TUSD Mexican American/Raza Studies Department, and an assistant professor from the University of Arizona) collaborated to develop a four-semester social studies curriculum that met the state's eleventh- and twelfth-grade social
studies standards (see Cammarota, 2007; Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Romero, Arce & Cammarota, 2009). This curriculum is based on a model of “critically conscious intellectualism” for strengthening teaching and learning of Chicano students in a school district where over 40% of its Chicano students leave school during the high school years (Cammarota & Romero, 2009). The model has three components: 1) curriculum that is culturally and historically relevant to the students, focuses on social justice issues, is aligned with state standards but designed through Chicano intellectual knowledge, and is academically rigorous; 2) critical pedagogy in which students develop critical thinking and critical consciousness, creating rather than consuming knowledge, and 3) authentic caring in which teachers demonstrate deep respect for students as intellectual and full human beings.

The curriculum teaches about racial and economic issues, immersing students in university-level theoretical readings. It includes a community-based research project in which students gather data about manifestations of racism in their school and community and use social science theory to analyze why patterns in the data exist and how they can be challenged. Students give formal presentations of results of their research to the community, as well as to academic and youth conferences. Cammarota and Romero (2006) noted that, “the standard educational system treats them as empty slates ready to be carved and etched on by teachers” but this project had offered students “an opportunity to see themselves as knowable Subjects” (p. 20). Students were able to learn to do advanced level academic work when it directly addressed realities of their lives. As Cammarota (2007) pointed out, remedial work does not engage students because it is not about changing their lives; a challenging, socially relevant curriculum like the one in this project helps students see how to use academics as a tool for changing their lives.

A considerable amount of data has been compiled on the academic impact of the Mexican American/Raza Studies Department’s courses on students; patterns in those data are presented in Chapter Six of this volume. Consistent with those data, Cammarota and Romero (2009) report that Chicano students in the SJEP outscored Anglo students in the same school on the state’s exams: 34 out of 36 passed the reading exam, 35 out of 36 passed the writing exam, and 27 out of 35 passed the math exam, which was a considerably higher pass rate than the Anglo students attained. Importantly, in interviews SJEP students consistently credit the program for their academic success. Students who participated in the broader array of Mexican American/Raza Studies courses in middle school and high school demonstrate remarkable achievement gains on Arizona’s high stakes high school graduation exam.

Teaching Boldly in Real Classrooms
In over 30 years in which I have been an educator, I do not recall meeting a student who truly does not want to learn anything. However, I have met many, many students who find textbook-driven teaching incredibly boring and irrelevant; when that is all they are offered, they often appear disinterested in and incapable of learning. I have also met many teachers who can think creatively about students’ interests and important social issues, but have little idea how to embed demanding intellectual work in a relevant thematic curriculum. As a result, a good number of school administrators these days are highly suspicious of attempts to be “relevant” and “student centered.” Add to this the number of educators who fear opening up examination of racial, ethnic, and social class inequalities—or anything remotely political—and the result is systemic exclusion from academics of that which is meaningful to the lives of many young people.

Ironically, when we use student-centered rather than textbook-centered teaching, embed preparation for college in rich thematic units that have meaning to one’s own students, and engage students in critically questioning society and learning to act for justice, then students from communities that had not been achieving well in school blossom in ways that show up even on standardized tests. Doesn’t this make more sense than the current approach that consists of marching everyone lock-step through the same pre-packaged curriculum materials?

Note

1. Kathy has written about the unit described here in more detail in Sleeter and Cornbleth (2011).