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Teaching Equity and Advocacy Planning in a Multicultural "Post-racial" World

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Abstract

This commentary brings together four scholars who have taught courses in diversity and inequity in planning to reflect on the challenges of speaking to and about issues of race, ethnicity, and cultural difference in contemporary equity and advocacy planning. Using evidence gathered from over forty-five years of collective teaching experience, we highlight students' struggles with questions about racial inequality inside the classroom and working with marginalized communities outside the classroom. The article offers pedagogical lessons for planning, highlighting strategies to help students and instructors navigate tough personal and professional questions about advocacy and equity planning in today's multicultural, "post-racial" world.

Keywords

Race, Diversity, Pedagogy, Education, Equity and Advocacy Planning, Service Learning, Community Engagement, Immigration, Inequality

> *As a profession charged with making urban life more beautiful, exciting, and creative, and more just, we have had little to say. Our task is to train a future generation of planners to go well beyond us in its ability to prescribe the future urban life.*
>
> Paul Davidoff 1965, 337

Nearly a half century ago, pioneering advocacy and equity planners Paul Davidoff and Norman Krumholz argued that planners needed to work not only with marginalized communities and on behalf of their interests in political processes, but also their commitments should extend into the classroom to inform the education of young planners. And indeed, their ideas proved powerful in transforming planning education. Davidoff's (1965) "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning" has been required reading in more than 50 percent of master's-level planning theory courses since the late 1970s, and Krumholz's (1982) "A Retrospective View of Equity Planning, Cleveland 1969-1979" in almost one-quarter of such courses (Klosterman 2011). Their continued popularity raises serious questions about their application in today's classrooms and planning contexts. Their writings seem to answer more questions about *what* students need to know, rather than *how* difficult concepts such as social, and especially racial, inequality and injustice should be taught. And further, some of their underlying assumptions of equity and advocacy planning seem outdated. As people from diverse ethnicities, nationalities, economic backgrounds, and genders have entered the profession in greater and greater numbers, the differences which were seemingly so clear to Davidoff and Krumholz between "us" (white, middle-class, male planners) and "them" (low-income, minority communities) are less so. And at a time of rapid immigration and the "browning of America," the disadvantaged communities in which young planners operate are vastly changed.

While there is no doubt that young planners are far more educated about and aware of the importance of equity and advocacy planning than fifty years ago, we believe there are serious gaps in students' and educators' knowledge about how to put these principles in action in diverse communities today. Most critically, we have seen students struggling to understand the ongoing significance of race to contemporary issues of urban inequality and to effectively engage with communities different from themselves. If planning educators are going to take up Davidoff's challenge of training the next generation to

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"create better urban futures," our planning curriculums must engage these challenges directly. A renewed discussion about equity and advocacy planning should include questions about how they can and should inform planning education in today's multicultural, "post-racial" world.

We hope to inform this conversation with our own lessons from the classroom. Our reflections come from our collective experiences of teaching planning courses in diversity and equity for over forty-six years and our varied personal and institutional backgrounds. We claim different racial and ethnic identities (African American, Chinese, white, Latino, and Asian Indian), genders (two women, two men), and nationalities (two of us are American-born, and two are foreign-born). We have also taught at diverse institutions, including predominantly white institutions (PWI)[1] and historically black colleges and universities (HBCU)[2] in the American West, South, Midwest, and East. Such a diversity of perspectives, personalities, and experiences are needed for a more inclusive and critical twenty-first-century equity and advocacy planning pedagogy.

Race Critical Perspectives in Advocacy and Equity Planning Pedagogy

As educators who care deeply about issues of urban inequality, we often find ourselves frustrated by students' level of preparation to discuss issues of race and racialized inequality. The ideology of "race neutrality" is common in many planning schools, as in society at large (Sniderman et al. 1991; Lipsitz 2009; Bonilla-Silva 2010). Students who do not see race as a particularly relevant category of meaning also often resist critical engagement with the structural, institutional, and political dimensions of ongoing social and environmental racism. Many believe that race *should not* matter—and their belief tends to inhibit their critical awareness and analysis of the ways in which race *continues to* matter in promoting structures of social inequality and opportunity. For instance, such color-blind attitudes are embedded in many students' beliefs that the urban environment is a relatively even playing field and their roles are largely to ensure a fair process wherein stakeholders are all equally informed and forums of participation are open to all. Their beliefs, however, side-step issues of access and voice that all too often deny different communities an equal seat at the table, as well as institutional biases that can make some communities' participation (or lack thereof) in local planning more meaningful than others.

Today's planning students require a more sophisticated toolkit for navigating hard questions about race. Julian Agyeman and Jennifer Sien Erickson (2012) have argued that there is an urgent need for planning curricula that build cultural competencies, including critical beliefs, knowledges, skills and behaviors that will help students engage with diverse communities in practice. Among the needed skills we note are a critical awareness of students' own racial and ethnic identities and how they shape their values, perceptions, and experiences. Without this awareness, it can be difficult for them to facilitate, understand, or participate in conversations about racial and economic inequality that are often at the center of communities' of color concerns. Asking students to reflect on their racialized identities, and how they have been formulated and are reinforced in urban space, is instructive. Oftentimes, listening to their peers helps students see their own diversity, the complexity of racial identification, and even recognize their own stereotypes and prejudices. One way to spur such discussions early on in a class is to ask students to write their own autobiographies to interrogate the ways in which race, and their own racial and ethnic identities, have impacted their relationship to urban space—their house, city, neighborhood, school, the places they visit, where they feel comfortable or safe, how they navigate the urban landscape, or their values, perceptions, and ideas about particular places. While these reflections can be painful for some, many students are empowered with new insights as they (especially white students) come to view themselves and their experiences as "racialized" in ways they had not otherwise considered.

Fostering productive dialogues about race is always difficult. We often see white students who have a hard time speaking because they fear being labeled as racist or the object of derision. Likewise, we see students of color that feel a burden of "representing the race" and speaking to a broad intersection of issues that people "like them" face. As instructors, we must diffuse the weight that all students feel by encouraging and modeling rules for respectful dialogue. Yet we must also accept that conflict and even stereotyping is sometimes the only way for students to have honest conversations. To foster open dialogue, the classroom must be a safe and democratic space. We support collaboratively laying ground rules for respectful conversation and directly addressing the difficulty of race discussions before they occur. Students can brainstorm productive methods and come up with their own "contract." This contract should be posted in an accessible place where instructors and students can always refer to and revise it from time to time as new issues arise.

Oftentimes, students require additional guidance in navigating the messy terrain of "race talk." This includes instruction on how to engage in healthy conflict and models of what race critical dialogue looks like. It is helpful for students to see these dialogues in action. Inviting guest speakers with opposing viewpoints, watching televised discussions, and setting up in-class student debates on critical urban issues like gentrification can give students different perspectives while also encouraging them to speak honestly (but not offensively) about race. These conversations must be handled with care. Students can easily shut down or become disengaged for an entire semester because of an off-handed or offensive comment. To avoid the kind of broad generalizations and hurt feelings that sometimes come from "off the cuff" commentary, students should be given plentiful opportunities for reflective writing and journaling as well as small group work. Students often find their voice in private and semiprivate spaces, but should also be taught to speak to larger audiences about issues of urban inequality to be effective advocates for communities.

We see issues around students' lack of appropriate language and voice most critically at predominantly white schools when compared to HBCUs. At HBCUs, students tend to come from more diverse backgrounds, the schools are often located in or near more diverse neighborhoods, and their institutional cultures tend to affirm students' responsibilities to serve underprivileged communities (Sen 1997; Sen, Kumar, and Smith, forthcoming). They reinforce the importance of explicitly challenging ideas about race neutrality and color-blindness. HBCUs tend to empower their students, both white and non-white, to speak their truths and articulate how systems of racialized inequality impact them all. Regardless of institutional context, however, by supporting diverse student bodies and faculties, engaging in meaningful work in disadvantaged communities, and fostering open and honest classroom dialogue, all planning classrooms can become productive places for race critical inquiry.

Instructors need not face these challenges alone. They can build collaborations with different disciplines that focus on issues of race, gender, and sexuality, and integrate the lessons of their scholarship in the classroom. Team teaching planning courses with Ethnic Studies or Gender Studies faculty gives planning students an interdisciplinary, and often more critical, perspective on questions of social difference. In class, they learn from their peers how different disciplines view and talk about issues of difference as well as an expanded vocabulary for doing so. For students used to technical planning reports, being assigned poetry by bell hooks or a novel by James Baldwin can be refreshing as well as a powerful medium for engagement.

Planning programs should also look within for opportunities to engage these issues across a broader spectrum of the discipline. Issues of social difference are too often taught within subdisciplinary silos. While we engage these issues in our courses on diversity and inequality, too often our classes are the only opportunity that students have for critical discussions about race and social difference in their planning education. To effectively teach students to be critical of the ways in which racialized systems of inequality manifest in their personal and professional lives and in different urban environments, such inquiries must infiltrate every camp of our profession—from transportation, housing, and environmental planning to land use and economic development. We cannot leave students to discuss such critical social issues only in designated "social planning" courses. Like at many HBCUs, these conversations need to be a part of the culture of our programs and central to our teaching, service, and scholarship.

Training students to be race critical also requires that they develop skills in urban ethnography. They must learn to see the ways in which race has and continues to construct urban parks, playgrounds, neighborhoods, cities, civic spaces, and everyday social relations. Students must also learn to reflect on their relationship to these spaces personally and professionally, and how their presence changes a space's use, meaning, and character. Their needed skills range from ethnographic observation techniques to analyze the use of public spaces and the invisible rules that govern them, to methods of analyzing field notes and photographs. These skills help planning students become more keen observers of the ways in which, as Richard Schein (2006) put it, "all American landscapes are racialized" (4).

Putting Advocacy and Equity Planning into Action

Davidoff and Krumholz encouraged planning scholars and students to leave the ivory tower and engage with low-income communities of color on their own turf and terms. In their estimate, this was important to achieving a more just and equitable distribution of urban resources. But this work also has pedagogical benefits. For students who believe that they are color-blind, service learning often destabilizes long-held beliefs (Harwood and Zapata 2014). While engaging directly with communities of color, many often see and feel, for the first time, their own difference. Although they may feel like outsiders, these experiences often make it hard to explain away racial inequities. Their struggles to define their own place and privilege while also learning about the lives of residents different from themselves forces students to ask what it means to plan in a community where one does not live; is unfamiliar with its history, people, and culture; or in which one is clearly an outsider and sometimes viewed as part of the problem. Students struggle with questions about the legitimacy, meaning, and effectiveness of their efforts and who should be driving the process. They come face to face with their own stereotypes and assumptions about these neighborhoods, and learn how individual bias and prejudice as well as larger structures of power contribute to their disinvestment. In working with residents, they often come to new realizations about these communities as real places with rich histories and cultures.

As in all community-based learning, students undergo a difficult process of putting theory into action. Many come into the classroom unprepared to do so. They simply have not had enough opportunities to engage directly with communities, especially low-income communities of color, during their education. In many planning schools, studios are taught as capstone courses and are one of the only opportunities students have for direct community engagement. Few planning programs maintain a commitment to long-term, engaged work, particularly with those communities most in need. As noted earlier, HBCUs tend to be exceptional in this regard, as institutional support is often provided for community development and social justice work in underprivileged neighborhoods. Such commitments teach students about advocacy planning, expose them to issues of urban inequality, and allow them to apply their planning skills directly.

While our institutions need to do a better job at supporting and encouraging service learning, individual instructors must also take up the charge. We need to make commitments to doing sustained work in disadvantaged communities, including many in our own backyards. Taking a long-term approach to working with communities helps create a sense of interdependence between the community and university that can lead to more lasting change and powerful lessons for students. In a course on urban redevelopment, students have been working with a local black business association in a low-income African-American community on a variety of neighborhood improvement projects over the last five years. Both students and residents have become more hopeful and aware of how change happens by seeing how their work builds upon that of former classes. As students arrive week after week, and semester after semester, residents see their care and commitment to making a difference, which over time, has broken down feelings of distrust between the community and university.

As educators, we have to help our students forge the necessary community partnerships for engaged work and equip them with the tools to understand the nature and complexity of the problems they face. To that end, we strive to introduce students to community-based organizations that are already engaged in advocacy work, ground them in a community's historical context and contemporary concerns, and develop their awareness of the potential positive and negative impacts of their work. We encourage students to go beyond the numbers to better understand places and people, not only using demographics and descriptive statistics but also sensitive analyses of vital social networks and community institutions as well as the structures that have and continue to perpetuate communities' socially and economically marginalized status. A variety of source materials offer insight into these issues, including community archives, planning and development documents, oral histories, and social mapping, including power, opportunity, and asset mapping. Contextualizing the struggles of marginalized groups helps students build rapport with residents and identify various forms of community agency.

To work together effectively, students and communities must establish a common set of visions and goals. Too often, however, students and instructors assume they understand the problems communities face before consulting with residents. But, in fact, personal and professional biases often cause planners to see problems in ways that are different than community residents (Day 2003). The lack of participation in defining the problem can lead to ineffective plans and policies. Students and instructors must learn to effectively engage residents and other stakeholders early on in the process. As many planners recognize, shared visioning and goal-setting requires open and participatory processes. Participation teaches students how to listen to residents' concerns and challenges them to empower the voices of silenced communities. In working with disadvantaged communities, this often requires them to go beyond traditional processes to include various formats and forums of participation. In one course, students found a multicultural festival to be a good venue for engaging residents from diverse backgrounds in new ways. At the festival, students asked residents to use small recycled objects to build their ideal community, which then served as the basis for conversations about what residents liked and did not like about their neighborhood. The exercise brought up concerns about the relationship between residents of color and police—an issue that later served as the basis for a planning studio. Learning about different forms of engagement encourages students to be more collaborative and creative problem solvers.

To help students build the necessary relationships of trust and rapport with communities, instructors also need to help students uncover, acknowledge, and think critically about the power and privilege that they and others hold relative to the people with whom they work. These issues should be confronted in course discussions, but like many lessons, are best learned on the ground. In a studio course designed around increasing Latinos' participation in planning, students learned how one city's failure to address the deep power inequalities between residents and city officials, including police, led to broken relationships and a sense of distrust between the community and city and increasing fears over some residents' unauthorized legal status. With this in mind, students were better able to tailor an approach that focused on how Latinos were already participating in their communities in everyday places, such as small businesses, churches, sporting events, and cultural festivals. Students were thoughtful about how these new forms and forums of engagement could repair relationships and build trust by acknowledging residents' fears and long-standing tensions and power differentials with city officials.

We also find a dire need to develop students' skills in expressing their own ideas in nontechnical language, and listening to and communicating with low-income and minority communities. We advocate giving students opportunities to meet with residents in informal settings, or what Geertz (1998) calls "deep hanging out." Students in one class had an opportunity to speak informally with Latino day laborers—an interaction that proved critical for becoming familiar with their stories, including their histories of homelessness and close ties to their hometowns in Mexico. Through such interactions, students learn various skills in cross-cultural communication, including an ability to read nonverbal cues and codes, and develop a familiarity with issues of common concern to different populations.

As Krumholz and Davidoff were keenly aware, for planning students to work effectively on issues of urban inequality, they must also be taught to work on behalf of the interests of disaffected communities within planning politics. While our class discussions often engage these issues, it is more effective for students to see planning politics firsthand. We advocate putting students on the front lines by allowing them to present

and advocate for plans within larger decision-making bodies and engage in direct community action. Our students have partnered with community organizations on different campaigns, including one opposing a proposal to expand a local jail. Students and local activists worked side-by-side to argue that investment should go into preventative programs and reducing recidivism. The campaign, while specifically opposing the jail expansion, was part of a larger conversation about racial profiling, institutional racism in the criminal justice system, and discrimination against those formerly incarcerated. Students' experience of activism gave them valuable insights into what it takes to impact decision- and policy-making processes. It also expanded their thinking about the range of possible planning roles. Students need to know that they can work in an array of jobs not titled "planner" but still require the skills of planning, many of which allow them to challenge the structure of formal planning processes from the outside in. Whether students choose a career as a community organizer, housing advocate, or social worker, their planning educations must give them opportunities to explore different roles and help them understand the implications of their choices.

Perhaps more than any other skill, today's students need to learn to think broadly and creatively about their responsibilities for working on behalf of issues of urban inequality. For most students, this is often an iterative process that happens not only during their time in school, but throughout their entire career. To give students an opportunity to reflect on these commitments, a class exercise that has been particularly popular asks students to design or locate an urban space that is "just," speak to its important qualities, and how it reflects on their own current or future planning work. Students are asked write poetry, sing a song, design a piece of public art, perform an act of guerilla urbanism, engage in community action, or somehow present their ideas in a format that is meaningful and personal to them. They are encouraged to use their work as a constant source of reflection on their values and commitments to the creation of such spaces throughout their professional careers.

In an age of unprecedented urban diversity and immigration, where social attitudes toward issues of race and inequality are constantly in flux, instructors are challenged to define for students what is to be an equity and advocacy planner. To meet this challenge requires that we constantly ask ourselves and our students about the ways in which race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and other factors of inequality matter to the ways in which planning decisions are made and how they affect the everyday lives of communities. While the contours of inequality may shift, the skills required to tackle them remain fairly constant. The next generation of equity and advocacy planners, like that last, must be taught to be sensitive caretakers and listeners of community concerns; reflexive practitioners aware of how their personal and professional norms, values, and practices can perpetuate inequality; and collaborative, creative problem solvers willing and skilled in taking risks for social and spatial justice.

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Notes

1. Predominantly White Institution (PWI) is a term typically used to describe institutions of higher education in which whites account for 50 percent or more of the student body.
2. HBCU is a designation conferred by Congress through Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965 for accredited public and private colleges or universities that existed before 1964 with a historical and contemporary mission of educating African Americans, while being open to all.

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