

Critical U: An experiment in utopian pedagogy

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The SFU homepage makes a bold promise: “We are an open, inclusive university whose foundation is intellectual and academic freedom.” This is an ideal that many in our University still hold dear. The struggle to maintain an open and inclusive environment of free scholarly inquiry and practice remains alive in the critical humanities and social sciences, despite the challenges of neo-liberalism and the corporatization of the University. However, as departments and programs are “rationalized” and funding is tied to “marketability,” new strategies are required for academic dissent and activism.

The Institute for Humanities is at the forefront of one effort to expand the University community’s critical efficacy beyond the slopes of Burnaby Mountain. Beginning last summer, the Institute again ventured off the hill to forge ties with a number of East Vancouver community organizations to develop “Critical U”, a unique community education initiative. What is noteworthy about this alliance is that it was neither initiated nor directed by the Institute or any other formal SFU organization. Rather, it was the result of the combined efforts of members of the University community and several non-profit organizations operating out of East Vancouver: the Vancouver Institute for Social Research and Education, the Vancouver Eastside Educational Enrichment Society, and Britannia Community Education. The Institute was an early and strong member of this affinity group, as was the Simon Fraser Student Society. The challenge for all the university participants was to avoid carrying pre-chiseled tablets of knowledge from the hill

into the broader community. Instead, the collective goal was to listen to the concerns and interests of those living in East Vancouver and bring our critical and conceptual faculties to bear upon relevant social issues and struggles.

The first result of this collaboration was the successful completion of



“Critical U”, a twelve-week pilot program in community education operating out of the Britannia Community Services Centre. Building in part from the work done by the “Our Own Backyard” community mapping project, “Critical U” brought various sociological, political-economic and cultural perspectives to bear upon such topics as democracy, capitalism, globalization, gentrification, mass media and consumerism. In contrast to other local community education initiatives such as UBC’s Humanities 101 program which focuses on those living in poverty in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, “Critical U”

sought to cut across a broader class spectrum in the Grandview Woodlands area. Participation was free and open to all, and previous post-secondary education was neither required nor expected. We had initially planned on an enrollment of approximately 20 people, but the staggering demand sent these numbers ever-upwards. By the first meeting, there were 38 people in attendance and 16 on a waiting list; clearly this was an initiative that was long overdue.

The pedagogical model for “Critical U” followed that of the organizing affinity group. Eschewing the top-down model often adopted when professional academics reach out beyond the classroom, the “Critical U” seminars were driven by the participants to the greatest extent possible. For the pilot project, we sketched out a series of six workshop themes, under broad categories such as “Political Literacy” and “Capitalism and Globalization.”

At the very first session in late January, we knew we were in the right place when one student questioned the spatial deployment of bodies, with the “instructors” at the front, and the “students” dutifully seated in the lecture hall. With our first lesson learned, we quickly reassembled in a large circle, a formation maintained for the remainder of the course. Ideas were flying around the circle, as the participants expanded and focused the suggested themes in directions most relevant to the community. Indeed, this lively discussion produced enough ideas to keep us busy for several years.

The next step was to seek out SFU instructors who were working in those areas, and who would be willing and able to accept the challenges of a participant-driven model. We are happy to say that the response from faculty and graduate students was very enthusiastic. Indeed, several of the facilitators commented on the vitality of discussion in the “Critical U” seminars; this can be attributed in part, we believe, to the fact that everyone was there because they chose to be there, rather than as a means to the distant end of achieving a grade or qualification. Another key factor was the wide range in the age, experience, political orientation, race and class of the participants. The absence of written work, grading schemes, and all of the regular coercive apparatus of the university was also crucial in creating and maintaining a sense of distance from an increasingly deadened world of work, school and consumerism. In the memorable words of one participant, we were taking a critical step towards “lifelong unlearning.”



Usually, the sessions went beyond the boundaries of the average SFU lectures. For example, one night, anti-capitalist activists and corporate managers considered the moral status of violent action against private property as a means of political expression. The productivity of difference without a moment of “integration” or “unification” gave rise to many such opportunities for critical dialogue and creative encounters with the “radically other.” Another night, a banjo-toting SFU labour historian facilitated role-playing with a select few as factory owners (with, of course, the requisite security force and strikebreakers) sitting on one side of the circle, and the rest as workers on the other. While the vicissitudes of production led to some swapping of chairs, the mobility experienced was enlightening for all. Later, this elaborate game of “Capitalism 101” truly became musical chairs as the facilitator picked away on his banjo in a hootenanny of 19th century labour songs.

In this sense, the “Critical U” space was truly utopian; that is, relatively delinked from the demands of instrumental rationality and professional performance. The necessity of “unlearning” was not taught by the instructors, however; it was a lesson learned by all. Throughout the planning process, and during the course itself, there was a continuous tension between intellectualizing about issues and discussing tactics for confronting them head on via activism and political intervention. This tension was never fully resolved, nor would we want nor expect it to be. Instead, it was a vital dynamic left in play. For example, following the session on consumerism and media, a guest from the Vancouver Indy media Centre came to describe the resources they make available for independent

media production. Such a direct linkage of a critique of the mass media with opportunities for concrete action to create alternatives precisely embodied our collective goals. This session was noted as one of the best by participants, and in the future we hope to make more of these sorts of concrete relays between the session topics and grassroots initiatives.

For the final “Critical U” session in early May, we asked participants for feedback on the course, with an eye to what we might do differently next time. Their comments were both plentiful and instructive. As well, some participants volunteered to sit in on our organizing group for a future course, while others volunteered to design a “Critical U” website as a medium for making available reading resources and posting event notices and so on.

By the end of the course, the class size had leveled at just below 20, a number that most participants deemed to be ideal. In the feedback session, there was a clear sense of reward expressed by students for the intellectual challenge at “Critical U”. As well, many participants spoke positively on the dynamic that emerged within the group, especially in discussions. Indeed, most participants expressed a sense of loss that the course had come to a close. Though our group was small, and the course short, it was a glimpse at a collectivity in formation. Here, the utopian impulse was proven alive and well, and so too that the critical humanities and social sciences could have a role in cultivating that impulse.