

Collaborative Projects

An Interdisciplinary Study

Edited by

Andy Blunden



BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

Contents

List of Contributors VIII

Introduction: 'Collaborative Project' as a Concept for Interdisciplinary
Human Science Research 1

Andy Blunden

Overview 29

PART 1

Research Projects

1 The Projective Method as the Basis of Continuous Education 41

G.G. Kravtsov and E.E. Kravtsova

2 The Dialectics of Collective and Individual Transformation:
Transformative Activist Research in a Collaborative Learning
Community Project 59

Eduardo Vianna, Naja Hougaard and Anna Stetsenko

3 Could Life Be... Producing Subjectivity in Participation 89

Morten Nissen

4 Rhythms of Collaboration 114

Vera John-Steiner

5 Seeking to Combat Educational Inequality: The 5th Dimension 125

Michael Cole, Virginia Gordon and William Blanton

6 Formation of the Concept of "Collaborative Learning Space" 158

Andy Blunden and Michael Arnold

7 Mayslake: Starting from Scratch 176

Helena Worthen

8 The Collaborative Project of Public Deliberation 196

Ron Lubensky

The Dialectics of Collective and Individual Transformation: Transformative Activist Research in a Collaborative Learning Community Project

Eduardo Vianna, Naja Hougaard and Anna Stetsenko

Introduction

In this chapter we describe the implementation of a transformative activist research project designed and carried out in collaboration with students in a community college in the New York City metropolitan area. The inspiration for this project was the critical need to expand current educational approaches for community college students, many of whom struggle in college. Guided by ideals of democracy and social justice, our aim was to move beyond instrumentalist conceptions of higher education that seek to only prepare students to fit in with existing social structures by meeting the expected demands of the job market. Inspired by cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT, see Leontiev, 1978; Vygotsky, e.g., 1997, 1998a, 1998b) expanded by the transformative activist stance (TAS, Stetsenko, e.g., 2008), we collaboratively implemented a project in which both students and faculty/researchers endeavored to move beyond the goals of adapting to the world to instead develop activist projects of social transformation in college and beyond. The specific goal was to work in solidarity in striving to break away from a narrow, commodified educational agenda focused on utilitarian learning outcomes geared toward future employability. Our method was based on co-constructing with students, based on critical-theoretical pedagogy (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011), a collaborative space and tools for activist learning and development to expand active engagement in transforming alienating and oppressive educational practices in the college and in their community practices. Thus, this project consisted in bringing together students and researchers to collaboratively investigate and promote the development of their transformative activist stance, through the tools of learning, by expanding the contribution of each participant to a widening range of community practices, sociocultural practices and discourses. In other words, we invited our participants to engage in the collective project of developing a genuine learning community committed to dialectically changing

institutional practices by changing and empowering themselves as activists who understand and commit to their indispensable role as agents of social change. The implementation of this project illustrates the core notion of TAS about the dynamics of individual and collective layers in collaborative projects as ontologically co-extensive, mutually co-evolving, bi-directionally related, and synergetically defining and sustaining each other. As we discuss below, this project integrates some elements of, but also radically transcends constructivist-inspired educational models that are fast becoming the hallmark of institutional reform in postsecondary education.

By describing the co-evolution of this project at the intersection of mutually embedded transformations in multilayered practices and the emerging activist agendas of the participants, our aim is to shed light on the dynamics of individual and collective levels of “collectividual” (as defined in the next sections) transformations within such collaborative projects. Thus, we describe how the emergence of activist agendas of the participants, though instantiated at the level of individual agency, was supported by, and at the same time itself supported, changes at the level of collective dynamics as part and parcel of an emerging collaborative activist project understood as a unity of individual and collective layers. In other words, as unique individual contributions to the collaborative project, the growth and expansion of individual agency was both called for and realized as the expansion of the collaborative project and vice versa – the collaborative project was both called for and realized as the expansion of individual agency embedded within the project development. It is the development of this indissoluble synergy and mutual constitution of individual and collective learning and agency that we aim to capture in this chapter.

In order to provide a contextualized account of the developmental dynamics of this collaborative project, we will first situate it in the context of competing educational agendas that have shaped the organizational structure and practices of community colleges. We will also briefly discuss how the liberal education reform movement currently underway in American postsecondary education has impacted higher education agendas, which has led many colleges to revise their mission and organizational structure (AAC&U, 2002). Because our project was situated in a community college whose leadership fully embraced the liberal project of educational reform, we will briefly describe how this movement has drawn on constructivist principles to address gaps and contradictions in higher education institutions that arguably create barriers for student learning and development. This brief overview will highlight the unique positioning of our project vis-à-vis this constructivist reform as it dialectically, both embodied and contributed to this reform agenda while radically reconstructing it, based on a transformative activist stance. We will

focus on the distinctive dialectics of learning and development in our project wherein these processes are shown at once to be instigated by and result from participants' activist contributions to creating their educational and other community practices. We then describe the implementation of our collaborative project as an emerging (i.e., growing and shifting in the process of implementation) collective endeavor that was launched with the goal of addressing institutional gaps at the intersection of a broad range of sociocultural practices as instantiated in the structures and practices of the community college. Our project addressed how these gaps were manifest and instantiated in each participant's positionings and stances toward their community practices, including toward learning and college activities, toward their future, and toward social and community practices more broadly. In addressing these gaps, the goal was not only to document them but also to implement activities through which participants and the overall project could transcend the limitations associated with these gaps. Then we present examples to demonstrate how participants' evolving and growing engagement with and contributions to the collaborative project led to shifts in their own positionings and stances at various levels (i.e., in their learning goals and broader life agendas) and how these changes, in turn, spurred changes in the collaborative project itself. In sum, the emphasis is on reciprocal and synergistic, collectividual dynamics encompassing participants' activist contributions to the collaborative project (at varying levels) and the growth of this project itself. One of the levels at which this dynamics became salient is the participants' expanding activist stance as the grounding on which learning and development became integrated.

Theoretical Grounding of the Project

Transformative activist stance (see Stetsenko, 2008, 2010a, b, 2012, 2013a, b, in press; and for its applications, see Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011; Vianna & Stetsenko, in press) has been developed in an extension of Vygotsky's project (e.g., 1997, 1998a, b) interpreted through a political-ideological, rather than value-neutral, lens. This interpretation highlights this project's exemplary close ties with the egalitarian practices of social transformation premised on a commitment to ideals of social justice and equality. Given the historical and sociopolitical circumstances of how this theory emerged and developed, and how it became assimilated in Western approaches, its revolutionary meaning and implications (both theoretically and methodologically) still await full explication.

TAS has been specifically developed as a perspective that opens up ways to understand human development that integrates notions of social change and

activism into the most basic assumptions of how human beings come to be, to act and to know the world.

In a continuation of a programmatic transformation, endeavored by Vygotsky, of the foundational premises on which traditional theories of human development are built, and towards developing a fully dialectical approach predicated on the notions of social change and activism in place of adaptation, TAS takes collaborative transformative practice aimed at changing the world as a constitutive core grounding for all forms of human being, knowing and doing. In accordance with the broadly interpreted Marxist and Vygotskian positions, but at the same time in expansion of those (due to re-fashioning them to more centrally focus on synergies of individual and collective subjectivity and agency), the central premise is that people come to know themselves and their world and ultimately come to be human *in and through* (not in addition to) the processes of collaboratively transforming their world in view of their goals and purposes. In similarity with other practice-based perspectives, this approach views human development as embedded in sociocultural practices and contingent on them, including their power dynamics, ideologies and discourses. Furthermore, expanding on these perspectives, and also explicitly integrating Bakhtin's approach (in its focus on *postuplenie*, see Stetsenko, 2007), TAS posits *transformative historical and ideological Becoming through activist contributions* to historically unfolding collaborative social practices (and their instantiations in specific projects) as a radically new *ontology and epistemology* that unites being, knowing and doing as aspects of one unified process of human development. This ontology and epistemology views processes through which humans change their world as primary and foundational in the sense that all other phenomena of human life are seen as grounded in these transformative collaborative practices, growing from them, constituting their dimensions, serving their goals, and never completely breaking away from these practices. Furthermore, because this approach affirms that all human activities (including processes of knowing and doing) represent instantiations of contributions to collaborative *transformative* practice, the vision for the future and commitment to bringing this vision to life are posited as central and inherent, rather than additional or supplemental, dimensions of human development, therefore revealing this process as being profoundly infused with ideology, ethics and values.

In capturing dimensions of ethics, responsibility, commitment, and directionality central to human social practices, TAS highlights the need for an activist stance vis-à-vis the world, embodied in goals and commitments to social transformation, as the key constituent of human development. On this premise, activist positioning and taking a stand can be conceptualized as an

ineluctable dimension and a primary condition for development, already present at the level of “elementary” processes such as perception – whereby even ‘simple’ acts of seeing are determined by one’s goals and orientations to change – all the way to higher forms of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. The argument is that it is the realization of this activist stance through answerable deeds – itself made possible only within ongoing collaborative projects and as defined through them – that forms the path to personhood and knowledge.

From a transformative activist stance, persons are agents not only for whom “things matter” but *who themselves matter* in history, culture, and society and, moreover, who come into being as unique individuals exactly through their own activism, that is, through and to the extent that they take a stand on matters of social significance and find ways to make a difference in these processes by contributing to them.

The transformative ontology of social practice – augmented by the notion of individual contributions to this practice as its carriers and embodiments – can be seen as superseding the very distinction between collective and individual levels or dimensions of social practices. What is offered instead is one unitary realm or process in need of new terms to convey the dialectical amalgamation of the social and the individual – “*the collectividual practice.*” This term suggests that individuals always act together in pursuit of their common goals, being inescapably bound by communal bonds and resources, yet each individual acts from a unique socio-historical position (standpoint) and with a unique commitment (endpoint), though always coordinated and aligned with the social projects/practices to which this commitment contributes. That is, the TAS reinstates the centrality of personal agency, commitment, and responsibility *on a new foundation* of a communal view about human development as a collective and collaborative socio-historical project.

Therefore, our TAS-based research project was a catalyst of a bi-directional and synergistic, simultaneous transformation that was social *and* personal at once, with both forms serving as facets of *one and the same process* of changing community practice *and* its participants. Not only do individuals change in the course of collaborative projects, they do so while and through instigating important changes in their community practices. That is, based on the dialectics highlighted by TAS, social change and individual development appear as directly connected to social practices and their specific collaborative projects; yet self-change, conceived non-individualistically, is not eschewed either. Understood not as an individual “psychological” endeavor, personal transformation instead is carried out as part and parcel of collaborative practice. This perspective therefore affords ways to reconcile emphasis on personal and collaborative dimensions of collaborative projects at the intersection of

individual and collective agency, thus overcoming the outdated dichotomies of agency versus structure and of sociality versus individuality.

Situating the Peer-Supported Activist Learning Community (PALC): Gaps and Contradictions in US Community Colleges

Established in the beginning of the previous century in response to a demand for a more skilled labor force, community colleges now comprise the largest single sector of American postsecondary education, enrolling more than 40 percent of all undergraduates (Schulman, 2000; NCES 2006–184, 2006; Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005). These two-year colleges typically maintain open admissions policies that provide access to postsecondary education regardless of high school preparation and performance (Griffin & Hurtado, 2011). As Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera (2005) point out, community colleges attract students who are unable to enroll directly into four-year colleges because they have not met admissions requirements. According to them, “[t]his is often because of poor college preparatory counseling and the cumulative effects of having been tracked into non-college-preparatory curricula in elementary, middle, and high school” (p. 281). Moreover, as community colleges are less expensive than four-year colleges, they seem to offer working-class students the opportunity to pay low tuition while working. Consequently, community colleges enroll predominantly low-income students, who constitute the most diverse students in terms of age, race and ethnicity, ability, and career aspirations.

Throughout their history community colleges have been fraught with three primary competing agendas, namely, to provide vocational educational, to confer terminal Associate of Arts or Science degrees, and facilitate transfer to four-year colleges (Solorzano et al., 2005). Such competing goals also reflect the broader political divergence of educational agendas that have shaped how colleges and universities define the purpose of higher education. Regarding their function to facilitate transfer to four-year colleges, community colleges offer students opportunities to complete the general education requirements of many baccalaureate-granting institutions. On the other hand, as higher education scholars have noted, “[m]any two-year institutions perceive themselves as being in service to local community learning needs – duplicating missed opportunities at previous levels of education as well as introducing new subject matter that is practically and oriented or technical in nature” (Griffin & Hurtado, 2011, p. 28). Recently, the Obama administration weighed in on this debate by initiating a highly funded program entitled *Skills for America’s*

future that encourages community colleges to engage in more private business partnerships, suggesting that the private sector should be more involved in the curriculum development in the community colleges based on the assumption that community college students are their future work force (US Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2013). Critics contend that these types of private-public partnerships often funnel students into low-skilled, low-paid jobs and thus not allowing them to achieve higher education (Beach, 2011). Importantly, this type of initiative raises concerns that the focus of educational practices will fall on narrow skills, which is at odds with the liberal education project's response to the demands of the twenty-first century – demands for more college-educated workers and more engaged and informed citizens (AAC&U, 2002).

Despite the growing national attention they have recently received, community colleges across the United States continue to struggle with disappointing graduation rates. Traditionally, community college students have faced significant barriers to success, from need of remedial classes to financial and housing problems. Not surprisingly, many fail to complete their studies, which is reflected in stubbornly poor retention rates. According to a large study, while 70% of the incoming community college students express an intention to transfer to a four-year college in order to pursue a bachelor's degree, only 15–25% actually end up transferring within a 4-year period (NCES, 2001–197). Moreover, a recent study found that 45% of community colleges students had left the institution without a credential after 3 years (NCES, 2009–152). This confirms a trend of continuously high dropout rates of which minority and first-generation college students make up a disproportionate level (Seidman, 2007).

In order to negotiate their conflicting agendas, meet the multifaceted needs of their students, and respond to pressures to increase the effectiveness of retention efforts, community colleges offer a wide array of academic support programs and student services, from tutoring and peer support programs, to academic advisement and counseling. However, such services are usually provided in a poorly coordinated manner due to the colleges' divided organizational structure, disciplinary priorities, and competing missions to educate students effectively (Whitt, 2011). In the next section we briefly review recent trends in higher education research that have attempted to bridge gaps in institutional practices with a range of instructional and organizational innovations. A key theme this work has underscored is how fragmentation of programs and services negatively impacts student success (King & Baxter Magolda, 2011; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This review allows us to both draw parallels with and highlight main differences

between our TAS-based research project and recently emerging approaches rooted in the constructivist tradition.

The Shifting Landscape of American Higher Education Practices

A broad reform movement is currently underway in response to sweeping social changes impacting postsecondary education in the United States. Driven by economic and political interests, there is mounting pressure on higher education institutions to increase access, accountability, equity, and excellence. These pressures have intensified as American colleges and universities have been challenged by a dramatic diversification of the student population, diminishing funds and financial support for college students, and the increasing uncertainty of the job market (Keeling, 2004; Thelin & Gasman, 2011). On the one hand, a conservative agenda of accountability, underpinned by the neoliberal ideology championed by business leaders and politicians, has exacerbated the vocational-academic divide by casting doubt on the employability value of a broad, liberal education and seeking to steer a large segment of the student college population into technical degrees that train students for the entry-level job market. On the other hand, the liberal education project¹ has responded to these challenges by launching a reform movement that has sought to expand and redefine learning in broader terms. Its chief concern is to disavow such narrow views of learning as tailored to specific skills whose success is measured with standardized tests to, instead, expand the core values of liberal education. Considered to have always been America's "signature educational tradition," liberal education aims at "expanding horizons, building understanding of the wider world, honing analytical and communication skills, and fostering responsibilities beyond self" (AAC&U, 2007). As the rationale for the liberal agenda is to prepare students for an increasingly global economy and society, the goals of college education have been recast in terms of higher order competencies deemed as indispensable requisites for the 21st century, such as integrative learning, intercultural knowledge and global citizenship. For instance, the Carnegie Foundation, a major funder of higher education research, recently published a statement on integrative learning that

1 Liberal education project is used here to refer to a broad coalition of higher education researchers, scholars and policy makers affiliated with institutions aimed at promoting liberal education in postsecondary institutions. Liberal education is usually defined as "a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a strong sense of value, ethics, and civic engagement" (AAC&U).

defines “[d]eveloping students’ capacities for integrative learning is central to personal success, social responsibility and civic engagement in today’s global society. Students face a rapidly-changing and ever-more-interconnected world, in which integrative learning becomes not just a benefit but a necessity.” Interestingly, liberal educators in higher education have argued, based on research with employers, that understanding of global issues is a highly valuable skill in today’s job market (AAC&U, 2013).

The emphasis on active engagement and integration has dovetailed with the notion of transformative education based on bridging learning and identity development. Proposed as a self-authorship process, learning is viewed as becoming meaningful when it starts with students’ own knowledge and engages them in reflecting on their discourses or frames of reference, a central dimension of students’ identities (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1994). In this sense, learning must be “included in a much larger context that requires consideration of what students know, who they are, what their values and behavior patterns are, and how they see themselves contributing to and participating in the world in which they live” (Keeling, 2004, p. 9). To this effect, student-centered, holistic education is posited as the remedy to transform utilitarian learning outcomes, which, according to this view, is responsible for the failures of higher education as it reifies education as a commodity. Focused on the “whole student,” this approach calls for developing wide-ranging and cross-disciplinary knowledge, higher-level skills, an active sense of personal and social responsibility, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge to complex local and global problems (AAC&U, 2007). Moreover, the collaborative and social nature of learning has gained wide recognition, casting further doubt over the traditional view of learning as an individual, primarily cognitive, activity.

Spearheaded by influential scholars and professional organizations, the liberal agenda in higher education has led to an impressive and growing body of research on constructivist-inspired innovative educational agendas that are fast becoming the hallmark of institutional reform in postsecondary education. Inspired by the metaphors of engagement and integration, constructivist researchers in higher education have decried the narrowly cognitive focus of learning and the conspicuously fragmented organization of higher education institutions (Bass, 2012; Keeling, 2004; Kuh, 2008, 2010). This body of work has yielded research evidence that the greatest impact of colleges and universities “appears to stem from students’ *total* level of campus engagement, particularly when academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular involvements are mutually reinforcing and relevant to a particular educational outcome” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 646; emphasis in the original). This constructivist-inspired reform movement has led to a plethora of instructional innovations in postsecondary education. Among these, the

American Association of Colleges and Universities has recently identified a set of so-called high impact practices, which has been demonstrated to be most effective in promoting robust learning outcomes (AAC&U, 2008). Those practices include first-year seminars and experiences, learning communities, collaborative assignments, writing-intensive courses, undergraduate research, community-based learning, internships and capstone courses and projects. As most high impact practices are not part of the formal curriculum but rather constitute co-curriculum activities, this body of research has furthered policy calls to transform and reconfigure the organization of higher education institutions. As Bass (2012) has noted, the currently underway expansion and reconceptualization of learning has clashed with the time-honored structures of higher education, as colleges and universities have been funded and organized with the formal curriculum as the center of learning.

Couched in terms of constructivist principles, into which sociocultural tenets have been incorporated, these high-impact practices clearly embody many progressive notions such as active, collaborative, experiential, inquiry-based, transformative learning. As such, our project shared many features of high-impact practices, such as bringing groups of students together with faculty and community-based learning that engages students with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve relevant problems in their communities (Kuh, 2008). However, while we concur with the need to expand the prevailing technical-utilitarian and primarily cognitive view of learning, our collaborative transformative project sought to go significantly beyond liberal approaches. Specifically, instead of merely adding the notions of transformation and contribution to an essentially constructivist agenda, our TAS-based project was inspired by a radically different understanding of transformation and contribution based on a dialectical approach to learning and development as grounded in activist pursuits of social transformation. This is a significant departure from constructivist approaches in higher education, which moreover lack a solid basis on which to link learning and development. As one leading researcher contends, despite the established association between a plethora of educational practices and self-transformation, “the mechanisms of development that reflect progress toward this transformation are not precisely understood” (King & Baxter Magolda, 2011).

A Collaborative Project in the Community College: Developing the Peer-Supported Activist Learning Community (PALC)

We turn now to how the two first authors implemented as lead researchers a collaborative project in the community college in New York City where the first

author teaches.² The student population of this college, like most others community colleges in the US, consists mainly of low-income first generation students who face myriad challenges (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In this particular college, 81% of students report household income less than \$25,000 and over 50% of students are foreign born with over one hundred native languages spoken in this population. Given students' social-economic status, immediate concerns related to emerging out of poverty, financial stability and upward mobility powerfully shape, and in many instances dominate, institutional discourses and practices, fostering pragmatic learning goals among students and instrumental notions of student success among many faculty and staff. However, such a narrowly instrumental orientation to learning, with its emphasis on narrow skills and technical training, clashes with the competing liberal-constructivist educational agenda, which emphasizes longer term, broader goals such as life-long learning and transfer to four-year institutions based on developing higher-order competencies such as integrative learning, civic engagement, and so on. Based on his direct experience with students and fellow faculty and administrators as a psychology professor, the first author witnessed first-hand how many students, caught in the midst of such competing agendas, vacillate between these two opposite positions and struggle to take a coherent stance toward learning, especially those uncertain about their career and overall future aspirations. Not surprisingly, many experience a high degree of alienation and oppression in their college education, which often seems to them either too broad or too narrow and, consequently, at odds with their respective instrumental or liberal life agendas.³

As soon as they began meeting with participating students, the researchers directly witnessed, as the literature on higher education has amply documented, conspicuous gaps between academic learning, especially in general education courses that focus on broad learning objectives, and students' personal lives and professional aspirations. These gaps and contradictions, in addition to institutional discourses about students as deficit learners, seemed to be implicated in problematic patterns regarding how students positioned themselves towards (1) *academic learning* as either marginally relevant to their

2 While the third author did not directly carry out the data collection and related research procedures, she contributed as a consultant from the inception of this project, from developing its rationale to methodological and analytical suggestions and recommendations.

3 While a smaller group of students who take an activist and even radical stance toward their community practices and society in general tend to identify with some faculty and staff engaged in activist endeavors, they too experience a high degree of disconnect in many classes and from the majority of other students.

personal lives or as an instrument to conform to the status quo and adapt to existing social structures, towards (2) *their peers*; characterized by a sense of individualism and a lack of solidarity in spite of shared struggles, towards (3) *the faculty*; leading to antagonistic or barely connected relationships, and also (4) toward college life and activities from which most felt disconnected and avoided participating in.

In response to students' anxiety regarding the disconnect between their current educational activities and future aspirations, we sought to address gaps and contradictions in their positionings and inconsistent agendas through a collaborative project, akin in some ways to a participatory action research project,⁴ that would foster synergistic links between learning and identity via the development of activist agendas. Organized around weekly meetings, our project initially consisted of bringing students together with the researchers to critically reflect on their college experiences in light of their learning goals and future aspirations. The recruitment of participants began with students who had taken a course with the first author. Some were invited to join the project because they seemed to be working below their potential, whereas others had approached the first author seeking career advisement or personal guidance. We started with a group of 6–7 students but soon the participants began to invite their peers. In a matter of weeks the group grew to more than ten students. As we already mentioned, we found an array of positionings among our initial participants, ranging from passivity to rebelliousness, though virtually all participants shared a general sense of disconnect, uncertainty and contradictions in regards to their courses and overall college experience. In terms of their future goals, they were either confused or unsure about this or could not meet the demands of their majors and projected careers. Moreover, they experienced a constrained sense of agency in their courses, characterized by lack of engagement and feelings of resignation, usually accompanied by resentment toward their instructors, which had roots in their experiences in middle and high school. In sum, we found a common pattern among participants of experiencing a high degree of disconnection and feelings of alienation in institutional activities that extended to their peer relations and personal lives.

Though students were critical of their courses and other institutional practices, and viewed society as egregiously unjust, they tended to approach their problems as their own personal issues, which they thought required individual

4 For a comparative analysis between our model of transformative activist research and participatory action research see Vianna & Stetsenko in press.

remedy, not collective action. Though some frequently shared their issues with a few peers, our participants typically did not even attempt to establish collective ways of tackling their problems. Accordingly, they sought the collaborative project, primarily, as an opportunity to develop personal skills and knowledge in order to be able to deal with the tough reality of their lives and education. In other words, virtually all students took an adaptive stance to institutional and community practices. As their discourses revealed, they related to social structures, including the college, as practically immutable. This seemed to reinforce their instrumental view of learning, which in turn led them to see any effort of investing in college activities beyond their courses, such as nurturing peer relationships, as futile at best. Even though many were struggling to complete their coursework as scheduled, they would frequently repeat that they wanted to get out of the community college as quickly as possible. Such statements indicated their commitment to a pragmatic view according to which “things are the way they are” (i.e., institutional practices) and there is not much anyone can do about it. Therefore one must not get distracted trying to resist or change the status quo but, instead, focus on one’s own narrow goals and complete the coursework. Not surprisingly, realizing this individualist stance was a struggle for the participants. Thus, the appeal of our project, which many perceived as an opportunity for receiving personal guidance or counseling. This was also evident in that some participants would volunteer personal advice to others on hearing their struggles with instructors, administrative offices, and even personal matters.

Our project was grounded in Stetsenko’s transformative ontology (as an expansion of Vygotsky’s legacy), which posits that people develop and learn by *contributing to ongoing continuous transformations* of community practices. Thus, our research was based on the notion that processes of learning and identity, as activist pursuits of seeking to transform community practices, necessarily entail the development of and commitment to future-oriented agendas or “endpoints” (Stetsenko, 2012, 2013a, b and in press; Vianna & Stetsenko, in press). In contrast to much research that avoids directly addressing the value-laden nature of research, our project was firmly grounded in the notion that collaborative transformation is always purposeful, intentional and as such shaped by political and value-laden projects. In this sense, the collaborative project as established in PALC was about *projecting* to allow students to engage in the process of “throwing forth” (cf. etymology of the noun “project”) into the future.

Inspired by Vygotsky’s claim that learning leads development, and the TAS notion that people develop and learn by forming activist stands and finding ways to matter in their community practices, we conceived of this

collaborative project as the pathway to expand students' agency by acquiring the tools of taking a stand on and making a contribution to ongoing community practices. Insofar as human development and learning are understood (per TAS) to be inextricably tied to activist contributions to changing and moving beyond existing practices (based in knowing about those practices), we aimed at reclaiming learning as an indispensable facet of overall human development in its unity of being, doing and knowing. To this effect, we invited students to join as co-investigators in an innovative educational collaborative project, to be created with and for them, wherein they could investigate and develop ways to become activist learners through learning about and contributing to their community practices. Specifically, our goal was to turn learning into a meaningful quest for personal and social transformation by developing (through active reconstruction) tools for activist positionings, or stands, which afford contributions to transformations of ongoing community practices.

The specific paths to this goal included developing the tools for activist learning about, critiquing, and discussing ways to transform existing community practices including their courses and activities in the college while connecting those to other social practices and their histories. Our collaborative project consisted of an original co-curricular program comprising a voluntary peer-based learning community, which we, in collaboration with the students, came to name the peer activist learning community (PALC). Building on previous work that applied TAS to research with and for underprivileged youth (Vianna, 2009; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011; Vianna & Stetsenko, in press), our method was based on critical-theoretical pedagogy, which merges Freirean (Freire, 1970) tenets with Vygotsky's inspired approaches, in particular Galperinian systemic-theoretical instruction (Galperin, 1985; for overview, see Arieviditch & Stetsenko, 2000). Thus, we focused on co-constructing with students tools for activist learning and development to expand each other's active engagement in transforming alienating and oppressive educational practices in the college and in their community practices. Thus, PALC focused on closing the gaps between students' learning goals and their overall life pursuits by using knowledge as a mediating tool for students' evolving activist agendas and agency. Specifically, we sought to engage students in (a) critically examining social practices and discourses (e.g. educational practices – starting with critically examining the immediate relationships and practices of the students in the context of the community college) leading to inequality, poverty, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination; including their own knowledge and assumptions; in order to (b) facilitate students' positioning (taking a stance) on these issues, including toward learning; and (c) develop activist agendas of contributing to social practices that could bring about social transformation.

Connecting Individual Action with Sociocultural Practices through Critical-Theoretical Learning

By having students share their individual struggles we expected that we could begin developing a communal sense of solidarity, insofar as that would facilitate their realization of the collective nature of their individual plights. Thus, we shared with students our early finding of how disconnected they were, which generated the theme of alienation as a topic of learning. One student had encountered Marx's concept of alienation in his sociology class, so we suggested reading about that in Fromm's *Marx's concept of Man*. We coupled that with the concept of purpose in life, to which another student had been introduced in his psychology course. Another student, an English major and a fan of Charles Bukowski and beatnik poetry, suggested poems and films wherein nihilism featured as a key theme. Learned together, these concepts provided the students with tools to critically examine some of their discourses and how they position themselves toward learning and other sociocultural practices. Hence, they began to develop a growing awareness of themselves as social, cultural, and historical agents who contribute to social practices. One student in particular experienced a strong epiphany as he connected those concepts to his job situation as a cashier in a retail store. Whereas he had previously taken his negative feelings toward his job, including a generalized lack of enthusiasm associated with fears of not having better options for future employment, as a personal foible, now he saw himself as positioned by powerful social forces as merely "another cog in the machine," as he put it. Though the empowering effect of such consciousness raising ("conscientização" in Freire's terms, see Freire, 1970) is hard to overestimate, many students were still not convinced that committing to build collective agency was worth their individual efforts. In fact, some openly expressed skepticism that anything beyond self-preservation and personal gains could ever bear fruits.

Despite these reservations, the weekly discussions mediated by critical-theoretical concepts opened up the participants to reflect on their stance toward their community practices as co-constitutive of those very practices. To this end, we added to our discussions a focus on the concepts of agency and contribution. While acknowledging students' experiences of discrimination or oppression, either in the college or in society at large, as part of broad structural patterns of oppressions, we simultaneously introduced the notion of agency as a way to underscore their individual participation in and contribution to reproducing or changing the very conditions they felt oppressed by. This notion became especially concrete for them with regards to their stance toward their courses, including their relationship with instructors and peers

and vis-à-vis their families' expectations. One of the most touching moments in this process happened when the first author asked Chris,⁵ who became one of PALC's most committed members, what kind of contribution he would like to make to social practices, to which the student answered: "I never thought of myself as capable of making a contribution to anything." This amounted to nothing less than a profound epiphany for this student who had been diagnosed while in middle school as having ADHD. Through group discussions, Chris began to realize how he used to view his mental abilities as his own individual and permanent deficits, including his shyness, which he viewed as a fixed trait, and his struggle with writing effective academic texts. Thus, Chris came to regard his "experiential knowledge" not only as his appropriation of an ideologically charged discourse within his community practices but also as a misleading individualist conception about his mental abilities whose generalized influence in his identity impeded the growth of his agency. As we describe below, Chris's transformation mediated by collaborative critical-theoretical learning, had a great impact in the collective dynamics of the group as it served as a case study through which many layers of educational practice were collaboratively analyzed via critical theories of education and human development. Thus, rather than being limited to one case of personal transformation, as important as that was, Chris's transformation was not only communally celebrated and a cause of collective pride, but it became embodied in narrative form as a symbolic (cultural) tool to both introduce incoming members to critical analysis of educational practices and models and to disseminate PALC's mission and accomplishments.

Gradually, a common sense emerged among participants that their individualist stance, mediated by reductionist and individualist conceptions of mind and identity, was not only integrally connected with institutional and other community practices, but that it was in fact through such a stance that the very practices that alienated and oppressed them were reproduced. Thus, we reached a paradoxical moment when the participants realized the *collective impact of their individualist stance*. With that, they also began to realize that even by passively accepting the status quo they were contributing to perpetuating it.

One important achievement of the project during this initial phase (in the first semester) was that learning concepts and theories in the social sciences became increasingly meaningful to participants as they began to apply them to understand their own circumstances. Based on these dialectical notions of

5 All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

agency and contribution, we invited students to position themselves as co-authors of their educational and other community practices through our project, based in the college, in which together with the researchers they could *collaboratively* investigate and expand their contribution to a widening range of community practices.

With the emphasis on the centrality of the notion of individual contribution to social practice in human development, as articulated in Stetsenko's work on the transformative activist stance, a shared activity emerged in PALC that consisted of discussing each participant's positioning toward a range of community practices in light of developing an activist agenda to transform those practices. Typically, each participant would bring up an immediate concern with a practice or relationship, such as a particularly problematic course, their struggles reconciling work and studies, or difficulties with family members. Under the guidance of the researchers, the group empathetically (i.e., non-judgmentally) embraced each member's personal concerns while challenging them to position themselves as agents who make a difference, even if only on a small scale, in their community practices and relationships. On the one hand, the group accepted each participant's feelings (whether it was anger, frustration, resignation, etc.), helping them to relieve the emotional burden and build solidarity around their common experiences with oppressive conditions and relationships. On the other hand, no matter how constrained participants viewed their participation in their educational and other community practices, the group encouraged and even challenged them to consider the ways in which they actively contributed to those practices – and sometimes emotionally charged discussions ensued. In this context, not only resistance but also, paradoxically, passivity were taken as expressions of participants' agentic stance and, hence, amenable to at least some degree of change and as a launching pad for transformation. The upshot was that the group's shared activity, instantiated by each member's personal commitment to building the group's collective practice, served as a platform for each participant to develop new personal goals and agendas to realize their changing activist stances. Central to these discussions was that each participant's stance, seemingly exclusively personal and solely individual concerns, including the researchers', were addressed as situated within and emblematic of larger societal patterns, structures and processes and open to be challenged.

This phase of the project, centered on critical-theoretical learning, was the starting point from which an array of bi-directional developments ensued, which increasingly merged students' developing agendas and stances with the collaborative goals of PALC, thus giving rise to a truly collectividual project. While the researchers initiated the project with the aim of developing a critical

learning site committed to an explicit agenda of social justice through implementing a critical-theoretical curriculum, the project gradually changed as students began actively participating in and contributing to the weekly meetings. As participants' trust and solidarity within the group grew, they began to feel supported and empowered, though often still feeling vulnerable and anxious, to try out more activist and agentic forms of participation in and contribution to their community practices. One common pattern in the group was to encourage and instigate students who were shy and lacked the confidence to actively contribute to classroom discussions in their courses to take advantage of PALC to start doing so. Although some members took many weeks (in one case even a couple of months) to feel comfortable to speak up in group sessions and take an active role in PALC, those who maintained their participation long enough (at least a couple of months) eventually became active contributors to the group. Thus, each group member actively contributed to collective decisions regarding the curriculum and to carrying out the diverse activities of the group. This was facilitated by the practice of collectively establishing the agenda of weekly meetings, including tasks and assignments (e.g., writing for the group's blog, assigning readings, doing group presentations). At this level, the group's agenda began to merge with each participant's agenda, which was now based on activist contributions to their community practices. Thus, whether it was about making suggestions to improve their courses or to change gender dynamics in their families, the participants began to take an increasingly transformative activist stance toward a widening range of social practices. This included a growing commitment not only to strengthen PALC but also to find ways for PALC to contribute to college activities and practices.

Throughout this process some participants underwent a dramatic shift in their learning identities clearly manifest in an increasingly agentic and activist positioning in their learning and courses. In one striking case a struggling, timid student changed his participation in his courses during one semester so thoroughly that his performance and grades increased to the point of causing great surprise among PALC members. At first, this student was reluctant, given his remaining shyness and aversion to being at the center of attention, to serve as a role model for PALC. However, under the collective encouragement of the whole group, the student accepted the invitation of the faculty mentor to give a presentation with the first author at the college's psychology club. This presentation caught the attention of a member of the college's center for teaching and learning and a brown bag presentation followed, which was attended by the dean of academic affairs as well as many departmental chairs and other faculty and students, including PALC members. The remarkable success of

these presentations for the college community served as a powerful incentive for participants to realize the potential of their work to contribute to institutional practices. As a result, not only was a new way to recruit students to join PALC established, but also participants began making connections with faculty and programs in the college as well as with other student organizations. Drawing on their own transformation, PALC members created a collective support system for them to find their unique voices in an expanding range of educational practices.

By providing students with a collaborative space and community resources for critical-theoretical learning, including for voicing their individual struggles, the PALC project served as a site for participants to formulate individual agendas (endpoints, visions, projects) while also merging them with the collective goals and endpoints in the project by sharing these during PALC meetings. Thus, we sought to explicitly position students as active and indeed activist agents of learning and of wider community practices and critical inquirers, rather than merely “undergoers” of the very struggles they were facing. As such, students were encouraged, once they began formulating issues such as discrimination, to pursue these as topics of social critique, reflection, and analytical investigation, thereby making it possible for them to develop their personal projects while at the same time contributing, through this very work, to the larger project of PALC. Through this model of activist research we encouraged all students to pursue their personally most pressing issues while, through presentations and discussions in the group, always seeking to place their individual experiences and questions within a larger societal context as well as within the social justice agenda of PALC. Increasingly, students’ emerging activist agendas began to hinge on transforming their educational practices and stances, which called for them to join their individual efforts with PALC’s collective agenda of activist transformation of educational and related community and social practices.

Inspired by critical theories of human development and learning, including TAS and related Vygotskian perspectives and critical pedagogy, PALC discussions focused a great deal on critiquing educational practices, past and present, whose myriad pitfalls participants knew all too well from having suffered their negative impact first hand. Throughout the process of reflecting on educational practices, the researchers shared their perspectives, experiences, and stances on the limits of transmission models of learning. These discussions entailed reimagining new possibilities for educational practices, which in turn called forth participants to take an activist position toward learning and other college activities. As participants shared and documented their individual experiences, a common pattern began to emerge where they could see the

connection between their educational experiences and stances, existing educational models, and broad social practices.

Students as Emerging Activist Scholars and Agents of Change

As participants continued to expand their understanding of the complex, historical links between educational and other social practices in connection with their emerging activist agendas and stances, they began to seek ways to collectively contribute to changing those practices. Their concerns and efforts centered on challenging and seeking alternatives to the transmission model of education, which became all the more evident to them in many of their courses, and its corollary view of knowledge as acquisition of information and skills. Despite participants' increasingly agentic and activist positioning in their courses, including taking much more initiative to build relationships with instructors and form alliances with those who were more progressive, they simultaneously began to see the constraints of the classroom as a site for transformative education. This growing realization, mediated by learning critical theories of education, led them to not only seek alternative practices and sites, as an expansion of PALC, where critical-theoretical teaching-learning could be realized, but also to consider the need for broader changes in the educational system and in society as a whole. Thus, the participants began articulating a desire to engage in and develop collective forms of activist contributions to college and other interrelated community practices. At this point, PALC had become a collective site for activist identity development, especially for those more committed to it. As a consequence, the more their communally shared personal sense of belonging to this activist project grew, the more they sought ways to intensify and broaden their social contributions, via PALC's collective initiatives, by seeking to give voice to their emerging activist stances and to channel them into practical changes. One way this materialized was through presentations such as the ones described above, which later expanded to other venues, such as in seminars and conferences at the social science department, in college-wide, and later in professional academic conferences.

Moreover, progress toward more cohesive collectividual dynamics was facilitated by addressing an important contradiction in our relationship with participants. Specifically, we decided to confront head on and pose as a collective goal the need to resolve the persisting gap between the authors as the researchers and the participants as the researched. One important way in which this happened was through discussing and learning about research models in order to define PALC's research methodology and establish it as a legitimate research

site. This was initially instigated by Hikari, a Japanese student who joined PALC after having taken a class with the first author, and entered the project with an interest in epistemology and a deep skepticism of research committed to non-positivist paradigms. Troubled by what she perceived as PALC's glaring violation of objectivity, Hikari began vocally questioning the validity of PALC as a research project. In order to address the questions she posed, the researchers suggested that she explore feminist epistemology and participatory action research. As the highly committed student she had always been, Hikari soon began devoting herself to learning about non-positivist models of science. As soon as she learned the basic critique of neutral, dispassionate models of scientific endeavors, Hikari turned into an ardent proponent of non-positivist research committed to social justice and social transformation. As Hikari became particularly disgusted with what she now saw as the thinly disguised and highly ideological character of mainstream psychological research, she began inviting her peers to join her in a project to critique and expand the curriculum of psychological courses and to find ways to reach out to other students. Since directly engaging their instructors in such critical discussions was often difficult, Hikari and other participants became interested in establishing a student conference for psychology students.

The establishment of the psychology conference, an inaugural event in the college (now in its third year), was crucial to strengthening the collective ties among participants culminating in a collective identity representing the lengthy transformation of their stances from recipients to critical producers of knowledge. Since each member had already developed her or his topics of interest and relied on PALC to learn about them, we spent a full semester helping participants to turn their topics into research and/or research proposals, many of which they worked on collaboratively. Thus, students worked on developing symposia, roundtable, and paper presentations. Moreover, they coordinated their efforts with the psychology club into a complex web of activities from preparing the call for proposals and the conference poster to recruiting students through classroom visits as well as faculty and staff to serve as discussants and moderators. In the following semester, some of these presentations were published in the first psychology student journal, published by the psychology club and inspired by this first psychology conference. In the wake of the success of this conference and journal publication, PALC and psychology club members began planning a college-wide social science conference, which took place the following semester. The implementation of the social science conference was emblematic of the expansive changes that PALC underwent as students contributed to and pushed the agenda of the learning community. The nature of how PALC developed was always spurred by finding

solutions to the contradictions that the project inevitably faced, as formulated first by the researchers, and later by the larger learning community. In seeking to engage these contradictions, the project's goals and activities continuously changed and expanded from first being primarily discussion-based to later critical engagement with academic literature, discussing and presenting it in the group and finally writing papers reflecting their own views presented at collective forums.

Expanding PALC through Activist Participation in Social Movements

One example of how students' individual as well as collective and collaborative contributions expanded over time is how PALC members became involved in social movements, and how this involvement fed back into and expansively propelled the project itself. This involvement occurred first in a struggle against tuition hikes and later in the Occupy Wall Street protest movement that was sweeping the United States from its beginning on September 17, 2011. As a part of our non-neutral critical-theoretical curriculum committed to an agenda of social justice we had been exploring the financial crisis in various ways (e.g. through watching a documentary called "Plunder," reading a text by David Harvey on neoliberalism etc.) in order to create a larger context in which to place our discussions of students' immediate experiences in the college. During discussions about the financial crisis in the spring of 2011, we were addressing the concept of austerity measures and ways in which the financial crisis was manifesting in our everyday lives, such as through public transit hikes. When the university announced that it would be implementing an array of tuition increases, the second author and a number of the students decided to show up for a university board meeting as part of a growing movement amongst faculty and students against the tuition hikes. Antonio, a Puerto Rican student who became involved in both the struggle against tuition hikes as well as in the Occupy Wall Street movement, was a student who despite doing well academically, was struggling to connect with other students and expressed feeling disconnected with his family and his overall community. Initially upon entering PALC, he was very shy and avoided participating in group discussions to the point of making the whole group uncomfortable with his self-effacing positioning. Gradually, Antonio began to express his issues, such as his resentment towards Puerto Ricans and how he understood his own academic success as a unique and individual achievement, which made him feel disconnected from his community. Through discussions during the weekly PALC meetings

and through the introduction of academic readings on issues of race, Antonio began to develop an agenda of exploring critical race perspectives and soon made presentations on both Puerto Rico and critical race perspectives in PALC. During his own personal transformation of committing to a critical race perspective and through becoming increasingly knowledgeable on the topic, Antonio brought a critical race discourse to the meetings and as such brought other PALC members into his own personal pursuit on the topic. Through this process, Antonio not only became a leader and a teacher within PALC, but ultimately contributed to developing the collective endpoint of PALC to now include a shared commitment to becoming increasingly aware of and taking a stance on racial justice issues. When the opportunity to enter the Occupy Wall Street movement arose, Antonio was particularly interested in how racial dynamics were played out in the Occupy structures and immersed himself in a fraction of the movement that sought to tackle questions of exactly this nature. Like Antonio, also Hikari, the PALC member who propelled the inquiry on the epistemological validity of PALC, became part of the struggle first within the college and later in OWS. The personal endpoints of both Antonio and Hikari, while quite different, were similar in their overall critique of the status quo and as such their different stances allowed them both to participate and become engaged in movements engaged in envisioning new futures. During their participation in PALC, Antonio and Hikari, by taking their individual, personal inquiries as starting points for their development, both actively contributed to the changing goals and activities of PALC as their own personal leading activities expanded and changed. The PALC project fostered students' developing individual endpoints while at the same time and exactly through this process contributing to the changing endpoints and activities of PALC. Central here is that the critical-theoretical learning catalyzed students' stands, which led to their changing views and activities, including participation in movements for social justice, which then again called for more learning. As Antonio became involved in the struggle against austerity measures in the college, he became curious about how political decisions in the college were made and, encouraged by PALC, he pursued it as a topic of inquiry. He presented his findings during a PALC meeting, including a critique of both the political process by which board members are chosen as well as a questioning of the racial and gender make-up of the board. Important to mention here is that throughout the process of students' transformative development, growing out of their changing activities from conference presentations to participating in social movements, the role of the researchers shifted and changed accordingly. As students pursued their own topics of analytical investigation and became more knowledgeable on specific topics, the power dynamics in PALC between

members and the two authors shifted. Thus, as students increasingly developed their personal endpoints and contributed to the agenda of PALC, they transformed not only their position within the project but also the collective power configuration of PALC. This entailed transforming the positions of the researchers into learners alongside other PALC members. Even though such transformation does not negate the power dynamics within the collective project, insofar as power differential between student and teacher identities were never completely transcended, this does reveal how gaining knowledge compels authoring agendas.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have laid out the rationale for a TAS-based model of research that asserts the impossibility of neutral, disinvested research and posits the need for researchers to not only be clear on their commitments (political, ethical, and ideological) but also to engage in spurring social transformation in community practices as being at the crux of research aimed at social justice and social transformation in support of this goal. With the description of a transformative activist, collaborative research project, based on mediation by critical-theoretical teaching-learning, we made the case for how the students' changes in their positions and learning identities were initially spurred by their participation in the project and how, then, these very changes helped to further propel and strengthen the project in its mission, its goals and its outreach. Critical for the TAS-based research is that the researchers' initial commitments and endpoints of seeking to transform the educational setting in which they positioned themselves as agents of change first set the ground for the changing endpoints and activities of the collaborative project, which ensued as the project grew and expanded. This was made possible because the initial endpoints of contributing to the transformation of learning practices in the community college were neither statically nor dogmatically formulated but instead, were intentionally left open for collaborative transformation to which students contributed in significant ways.

Our aim was to demonstrate the importance of spiral, bi-directional dynamics of individual and social levels in this collaborative project, what Stetsenko (2010a; 2013a,b) has termed the collectividual dynamics. At the core of this approach, which tackles head on the traditional and arbitrarily dichotomous split between the individual and the collective, is that people develop and become human *in and through* collectively acting on the world and *contributing to collaborative projects of their communities*, as captured by the

“collectivual” dynamics. Engendering a collaborative project aimed at social justice thus necessarily entails allowing personal, historical paths to come together in a collaborative effort. The implementation of the PALC and its ensuing transformation, once initiated, served as a strong illustration of how TAS-predicated research in the context of a community college facilitated the collectivual dynamics. Specifically, we showed how students’ individual as well as collective and collaborative contributions expanded over time as they increasingly mastered the critical-theoretical knowledge and developed their stance first *within PALC*, as contributors to the critical-theoretical curriculum within the group. Later on, through developing their individual, personal projects of inquiry and identity and their life agendas, the merging of participants’ activist stances with PALC’s collective activist stance began to manifest *in the broader context of the community college* and its structures. This dynamic was exemplified as students began to change their stance from passive recipients of education to activist scholars who can and do make a difference in their own community and learning including by finding their own voice such as through presenting their diverse, yet connected and collaboratively developed “endpoints” at the social science conference (e.g. through interrogating objectivity, deficit models of learning, and critical race perspectives to mention a few). Finally, PALC’s contribution expanded and changed *in and through larger societal projects and contexts* (e.g., Occupy Wall Street, Board of Trustees meetings) as its members participated in and contributed to larger social movements aimed at a social transformation, outside of the initial collaborative project. The ways in which PALC expanded as members became engaged in both the struggle against tuition hikes and later the Occupy Wall Street movement, bring forth the complex paths in which projects aimed at social change necessarily need to stay open to connecting with and being transformed by other projects while at the same time transforming these projects too. In this case participants’ expansive engagements with political projects outside of the core, initial project (such as participation in and contribution to OWS) fueled the research project’s initial commitment to challenging and transforming educational practices and ultimately brought a new perspective connected to the need for larger societal change, not unconnected to the struggle in the college, yet beyond its bounds. While the emergence of such a movement that students ultimately participated in could not have been predicted, PALC always sought to connect and place the immediate critique of the college within a larger context that allowed this project to connect with other social transformative projects with similar goals of social justice like that of the OWS movement. The open-ended nature of the PALC project, while being fiercely committed to an agenda of social justice, allowed exactly for this unforeseen

expansion that took place as students entered the OWS movement. To this end, the critical-theoretical learning played a central role. By drawing on critical-theoretical knowledge, students developed tools to systematically connect their diverse everyday experiences with current events and to link those with larger societal patterns and their unfolding histories and conflicts. Thus, our project created a space in which tools needed for engaging in activist pursuits aimed at not only transforming practices within the context of the community college but beyond, could be explored, created and agentively appropriated. Critical to this joint collaborative project between researchers and participants and its iterative cycles of change and expansive growth, was the expertise students contributed, with this expertise stemming especially from their membership in marginalized groups and their associated first-hand experiences of social struggles and conflicts. This provided invaluable insights and propelled the project as it interrogated community practices, including power dynamics within and beyond the research site. Developing the collective endpoints for social change was accomplished through critically interrogating strengths and contradictions of positions taken by all parties involved, of both students and researchers, in the continuous expansive and collaborative dynamics of the PALC project.

We believe that the new model of educational practice implemented in our project offers a viable and more thoroughly democratic alternative to prevailing instrumentalist conceptions of higher education. Inspired by the transformative activist stance, our project centered on providing students with an open-ended learning community where mediation by critical theories served as tools for students to develop activist pursuits of social transformation in college and beyond. In this sense, our approach simultaneously embodies and expands the goals of integrated learning, which seeks to prepare students to be informed citizens who understand their role in and act responsibly in a globalized world. To this effect, our project explicitly and critically addressed the limitations inherent in the liberal educational agendas that ultimately seek to adapt students to the status quo. Thus, instead of preparing students to fit in with existing social structures, we invited our participants to engage in the collective task of developing "*collectividal practice*" committed to dialectically changing institutional and related community practices. This in turn called for them to change and empower themselves as activists who understand and commit to their indispensable role as agents of social change. Thus, the model of educational practice proposed here, based on working in solidarity with disadvantaged students, goes beyond the liberal educational agenda in that it directly attempts to break away from a narrow, commodified educational agenda focused on utilitarian learning outcomes. Instead, our model is

predicated on a more equitable and democratic agenda grounded in a dialectical theoretical approach to learning and development that focuses on how *individuals not only change in the course of collaborative projects, but do so while and through instigating important changes in their community practices*. In sum, following TAS, our project directly addressed how individuals always act from a unique socio-historical position (standpoint) and with a unique commitment (endpoint), though always coordinated and aligned with the social projects/practices to which this commitment contributes.

To conclude, central to this collaborative project, and to the underlying TAS approach, is the premise that social change is possible and that students and researchers, through committing to activist projects of social transformation and working to implement their agendas, can and do make a difference in their own development and learning *and* in the larger social processes and community practices (with these being bi-directional, recursive, and synergistic processes). Our hope is that the work in the PALC project, with its lessons regarding the role of activist stance in promoting expansive growth at both individual and collective layers within collaborative projects, will inform other activist scholars in our shared pursuit of the new political imagination and social transformation aimed at social justice.

References

- Arievitch, I.M., & Stetsenko, A. (2000). The quality of cultural tools and cognitive development: Gal'perin's perspective and its implications. *Human Development*, 43, 69–92.
- Association of American Colleges and Universities – AAC&U (2002). *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College. National Panel Report*. Washington, D.C.: AAC&U. Retrieved September 3, 2013, from <http://greaterexpectations.org>.
- Association of American Colleges and Universities – AAC&U (2007). *College Learning for the New Global Century. National Report*. Washington, D.C.: AAC&U.
- Association of American Colleges and Universities – AAC&U (2008). *Liberal Education and Global Citizenship: The Arts of Democracy*. Retrieved September 3, 2013, from <http://www.aacu.org/globalcitizenship/index.cfm>.
- Association of American Colleges and Universities – AAC&U (2013). *It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success*. Retrieved September 3, 2013, http://www.aacu.org/leap/public_opinion_research.cfm.
- Bass, R. (2012). Disrupting Ourselves: The problem of learning in higher education. *Educause Review* 47(2), 23–33. Retrieved September 3, 2013, from <http://www>