

The Community as Classroom: Personal Reflections of a “Retired” Reconstructionist Educator

By Gertrude Feinstein Langsam

June, 1993, marked my 55th year of graduation from Adelphi University, an event marked not only by its baccalaureate distinction but by the fact that it was at Adelphi that I first met Theodore Brameld, an Instructor of Philosophy there. I recognized at a very tender age that Brameld was a special teacher, and in spite of my youth, I knew almost instinctively that I was going to be confronted with exciting and vigorous ideas (“vigorous” was one of his favorite words). I knew that I was, indeed, a most fortunate student to be challenged by such an exciting mind.

After the initial course in “Introduction to Philosophy,” I proceeded to register for every course that Brameld taught—“Philosophy of History,” “Philosophy of State,” “Philosophy of Religion”—and we proceeded in class to go wherever the Socratic dialogue took us. We were introduced to the “Allegory of the Cave,” the sharp critical thinking of Bertrand Russell, and the provocative ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Needless to say, we were constantly challenged by our readings and the dialogues that followed in the classroom.

In addition to the assigned readings and papers,

*Gertrude Feinstein
Langsam is a professor
emerita, adjunct faculty,
School of Education,
Adelphi University,
Garden City, New York.
She resides in New
Haven, Connecticut.*

The Community as Classroom

we had guest speakers—all friends of Brameld's—who challenged us with each visit to the classroom. I remember, for example, Willard Uphaus who greeted us one morning with the salutation, "Students Awake!"—and this he did! He was executive director of the Religion and Labor Foundation, and was determined to unite people in the fields of religion and education in their common struggle against fascism. The year was 1937-38, and Brameld and Uphaus were issuing clear warnings against the rise of dictatorships in Europe and the threat to Americans at home. Brameld clearly saw the connection between school and society, and acted upon his conviction.

On another occasion, we went with Brameld to Cooper Union in New York City to meet, and to hear, Morris Raphael Cohen. Brameld regarded Cohen as an outstanding teacher, and someone who had keen insight into the problems of the working class. Cohen strongly believed in the application of the "scientific method" to the study of social and economic problems, and Brameld was most anxious for us to come in contact with him. Since the lecture was held at Cooper Union, Brameld knew that the opportunity to hear Cohen in the same building where President Abraham Lincoln had once spoken would provide us with intellectual stimuli beyond measure. In Brameld's eyes, men like Uphaus and Cohen went beyond the classroom or lecture hall; they were "doing" philosophy.

When I was asked recently to write about my own experiences since "retirement" in the city of New Haven, the invitation was welcomed as a fine opportunity to look back, as well as to reflect upon my current reconstructionist beliefs and action. My years of "retirement" are in keeping with Brameld's theory of "reconstructionism," which stresses the responsibility of the educator to the community and the application of "ends and means." New Haven is like any other city in the United States at this point in time; it is torn by economic problems, divided by interracial misunderstanding, and confronted by changing trends in population. The schools reflect the crisis in our social and economic life, and the headlines frighten people with stories of crime, interracial strife, and failing businesses.

With all of the above, how do I try to bring the lessons of the Brameld classroom to the school and society in which I live? How can I make a difference in the lives of the children, the teachers, and the neighborhood as a whole? I would like to share several experiences in which I have been involved and in which I have tried to make a difference.

Summer in Faith

Last summer (for the second time), I was part of a week-long program called "Summer in Faith." This was a "city camp" program housed at my synagogue, Congregation Mishkan Israel, Hamden, Connecticut, and sponsored by the Downtown Cooperative Ministry. The latter is the combined body of most of the local religious groups in New Haven. The children were transported to the "camp" each

Langsam

morning and returned to their homes in the late afternoon by The New Haven Bus Company with no charge to the parents or to the religious organizations.

During the week, children from diverse ethnic groups had arts and crafts, music, quiet games, athletics, dance, and as many activities as we could find volunteers to teach. The children, ranging in age from five to 13, were all served a hearty lunch at noon, and helped in the preparation of the meal. I should also mention sports, because the boys and girls had a great time playing volleyball with our Rabbi last July, and also played baseball with my 16-year old grandson!

The special philosophy of the camp was demonstrated during the tie-dying activity. One day during the week, children from the Quaker, Bahai, and Unitarian Universalist churches tie-dyed shirts. As the children dipped their cotton shirts into different pots of dye, they learned that every shirt, starting out the same, became special. The activity demonstrated to the children that shirts with different designs or colors “together make a rainbow.” On still another day, almost 200 young people from various churches learned a traditional Jewish folk dance. All the adults in the program, myself included, age 75, joined the youngsters in circling the floor, jumping to the rhythm of the music, and clapping hands in happy unison with our new partners.

I started my discussion of “the community as classroom” with this example, not only because it was so recent, but because it was an active demonstration of interage, interfaith, and interracial teaching and learning. It reached out to different parts of the population, all determined to reconstruct the part of the world in which they live!

The Amistad Story

On a completely different level, I would like to share “The Amistad Story.” Some may be familiar with the story of the Mendi people, who were brought to this continent from Africa as part of the infamous slave trade that was conducted in the 19th century. Through the combined effort of many experts in the field of education, African and United States history, and museum studies, the Board of Directors of the Amistad Committee in cooperation with the Connecticut Historical Society, the Connecticut Humanities Council, the Connecticut Board of Education, and the Connecticut Federation of Teachers sponsored workshops, demonstration lessons, bibliographies, and a slide-show to assist teachers in presenting the story of the Amistad Revolt in their classes. One curriculum packet, *Free Men: The Amistad Revolt and the American Anti-Slavery Movement*, contains not only the story of the revolt, the account of the Mendi people in America, the trials, and their return to Africa, but also suggests lists of classroom activities, maps, illustrations, and a range of student activities.¹

I am proud to say that when I brought the handsome portrait of Cinque (the leader of the Amistad Revolt) to the Yale Co-op, one of New Haven’s largest stores, the manager placed the portrait in a prominent window, and it remained on view all

The Community as Classroom

during Black History Month. While this activity was going on in the New Haven public schools, in the public library, and in other places in the community, a very serious fund-raising drive was under way to commission a statue of Cinque. Our combined efforts bore fruit; a statue of the leader of the Amistad Revolt is now on view in an area adjacent to the New Haven Green.

As I worked on the various aspects of the Amistad Story in the local library, the museum, and the schools—as well as in various fund-raising projects—I thought many times of Brameld. The entire effort was a learning experience for the adult community, as well as the school population. It became “living history,” as we discovered bibliographies, conducted tours in the local New Haven Colony Historical Museum, and tried to raise the level of community understanding regarding the importance of the Amistad Revolt.

The Teacher as World Citizen

For the past several years, the Connecticut League of Women Voters has been involved in an annual symposium at Yale University known as “SIR: Symposium on International Relations.” This consists of a yearly symposium under the joint leadership of the Connecticut Division of the League and the university, which is devoted to discussion of a serious current issue. I have played a leadership role in these events which are open to the general public and provide a forum for the consideration of a major problem. Over the past several years, the subjects have included such areas of concern as: Impact of the Media on Foreign Affairs (1992); Europe in Transition: Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia (1991); Global Environment: Is Earth An Endangered Species? (1990); Drugs, Pollution, and Indifference: How Can A North American Economic Partnership Overcome This Challenge? (1989); and Glasnost: Perspectives on Change in U.S.-Soviet Relations(1988).

Through means of these yearly symposia, the League provides a forum for the discussion of critical issues in international affairs. Brameld, in *The Teacher as World Citizen* and throughout his other writings, emphasized the importance of international cooperation, shared responsibility, and the role of the informed citizen. As I continue to take my place in these annual events, I renew my commitment to educational reconstruction and the social responsibility of the informed citizen. The cooperation of the University (Yale) and the informed citizen (League of Women Voters) is a combination in the Brameld mode!

Another example of the responsibility of the teacher in the community is the Peace Messenger Cities Assembly that was conducted in New Haven in September, 1990. The first such gathering was held in 1988 in Verdun, France, and the second in 1989 in Warsaw, Poland. The 1990 Peace Messenger Cities Assembly marked the first such gathering in North America. The New Haven Assembly coincided with the International Day of Peace and with the opening of the 45th session of the United Nations.

Langsam

My particular role in the Assembly consisted of working with the Mayor's Office of Public Relations, the New Haven Public Schools, and the New Haven Public Library. I was helpful, too, in bringing to New Haven a group of students from the University of Connecticut, led by reconstructionist educator Frank A Stone, who demonstrated methods of teaching "Conflict Resolution in the Classroom." The involvement of the Society for Educational Reconstruction through my own participation, plus the understanding of Stone and his students, was a real and dramatic illustration of the importance of "networking," university partnership, and international responsibility.

Perhaps the community program that I remember most vividly was the anniversary commemoration of the deaths of James Cheney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, the three civil rights workers murdered in Mississippi in the 1960s. This was a program that I organized at the Varick AME Zion Church, which had been one of the "stops" on the Underground Railroad. I strongly felt that this was the most appropriate place for such a commemoration to be held. The evening was the culmination of many efforts: a Yale University professor wrote the "History of the Underground Railroad and the Role of New Haven" that appeared in the program; hymns and other musical selections were arranged by interfaith groups; and the program itself was printed by Congregation Mishkan Israel. The combination of many hands made **real** the sacrifice of Cheney, Schwerner, and Goodman, and the service held in this historic building made the evening truly memorable.

The program described above was an example of many of the strong interfaith, multiracial commitments of Congregation Mishkan Israel, and I am proud to have served as chair of its Social Action Committee for more than eight years.

Another strong example of social action in the community was the New Haven-Black History Celebration of the life and work of Paul Robeson. This event was marked by book exhibits in the New Haven Public Library, special displays at other locations in New Haven, and appropriate assignments in the New Haven Public Schools. I helped to organize reading lists and assignments on the "Life and Times of Paul Robeson" that were used in some social studies classrooms.

In 1984, when we moved to New Haven, Delta Kappa Gamma, an international honorary society for women educators, in which I had served when we lived in New York State, invited me to join the Connecticut Chapter. Members of the chapter were formulating plans for a state committee that would be devoted to peace work in the schools. I joined the group and immediately became involved in formulating aims and programs for this new committee. Our first public meeting was held at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven and was, for the most part, a question-answer session of "Aims, Functions, and Methods of Peace Education in the School." As we advanced in membership, we proceeded to issue a newspaper which circulated among the "Curriculum of Hope" members and served primarily as an exchange bulletin where ideas and techniques on "teaching peace" could be formulated. Now, after eight years of progress, the committee has been named a

The Community as Classroom

standing committee of Delta Kappa Gamma, and our role as a Peace Education Committee in Connecticut is assured.

Schools Without Walls

In 1960, James J. Shields wrote a Phi Delta Kappa Fastback booklet in which he stated that the principal “isms” affecting our schools and society were: sexism, ageism, and racism. I think of Shields’ statement very often, and would like to conclude my essay in honor of Brameld by citing two projects in which I have been directly involved where a strong effort has been made to remedy some of the problems projected by Shields.²

Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers (IVC): This is a volunteer group set up in New Haven to help care for the needs of the frail and the elderly: people who need others to read to them, to shop for them, to call them on the phone occasionally, and in many ways to make them feel part of the larger community. My husband and I believe that our involvement with the Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers—reading to the elderly, shopping for them, helping to care for their plants, and so forth—is an extension of our home. We talk in lecture halls and in textbooks about “schools without walls.” I believe that the work of the Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers is a bona fide illustration of the “home without walls,” and I am proud to be a member of this very special, caring community of volunteers.

Eleanor Roosevelt Essay Contest: As vice president of programs for the New Haven Chapter of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), I suggested to the chapter and to the superintendent of the New Haven Public Schools the idea of a School Essay Contest on the subject of *The Life, Work, and Times of Eleanor Roosevelt*. The superintendent was very reassuring in terms of the merit of such a contest and recommended that I work with one high school and one particular English department chair. His suggestion was very wise, and I worked with Lou Ann Bohman of the Wilbur Cross High School in New Haven. Since I wanted the Essay Contest to go beyond the walls of the school, I solicited the cooperation of some very well-known judges from the larger community: James Vivian of the Yale Teachers Institute; Robert Leeney, emeritus editor, *New Haven Register*; and Syd Lillick, assistant principal, Hillhouse High School. The students were touched by Eleanor Roosevelt’s leadership in promulgating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and her concern for creating a more just and equitable society for all people. The first prize winner was a sophomore student, and the second prize was won by a senior. The entire experience was more than an “essay contest;” it was a demonstration to the entire community that there could be positive ways in which the **school** and the **city** could work together to provide outlets for self-expression and creative thinking. The Essay Contest was a striking example of a cooperative effort between the New Haven Public School System and the New Haven Branch

of the AAUW, and also a demonstration of Brameld's belief in the harmony between "ends and means." The contest proved to be a dynamic "means" that involved the school and the community in an equally dynamic and positive "end."

Looking Ahead

On the horizon, I have set in motion some plans for our first AAUW meeting when our guest speaker will be a Native-American woman who teaches in nearby Hartford. Her name is Dovie Thomason and she teaches in the Humanities Department at the University of Hartford. Her topic will be "Women as Culture Bearers." We have just completed registering high school seniors at Hillhouse High School as part of the regular League of Women Voters Project, and the summers have other projects in store for us.

After serving on the Planning Committee of the 1992 international conference of the World Education Fellowship and chairing two of the special sessions, one devoted to a dialogue with members of the Society for Educational Reconstruction and the other to the Institute for Learning in Retirement (ILR), I am now devoting considerable time to this institute.

The ILR is a very special organization devoted to fulfilling the educational and community needs of the older citizen in the community. Through means of its curriculum committee, the Institute provides (at minimum tuition) a series of morning and afternoon classes for "retired" men and women. The classes are called "study groups," and cover such topics as the environment, poetry, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Emily Dickinson, timely topics, and cultural potpourri. The program is so constructed that the study group leaders can be leading a course one day, and attending study groups as students the following day. It is truly a Dewey-like, or Brameld-like, arrangement where leaders-and-students learn from one another.

I am now about to lead my fourth study group, this one concerned with film. My previous course dealt with local theatre in Connecticut, and I was able to gather together a group of theatre critics as well as people in the area of drama and literature, stagecraft, and other aspects of "live" stage. The response of the class was warm and reassuring, and encouraged me to try a new medium of communication. In the ILR there is a very fluid arrangement between "teacher and student" and the emphasis is utilizing wherever possible the resources of the community. Thus, in the study group concerned with theatre, the group moved to the Yale Repertory Theatre for a morning "behind the scenes" and at another time went to the Long Wharf Theatre, also in New Haven. Perhaps one of the most exciting experiences was a morning with undergraduates at Albertus Magnus College to see a production of **Hamlet**. The latter was "pure Brameld!" Here, the students (ages 18 to 22) engaged in exciting post-play discussion with the audience (65 and over)! The dialogue was fluid, exciting, and productive. The actors learned much from the questions of the audience and the morning moved from on-stage to off-stage. The

The Community as Classroom

intergenerational conversation continued after the staging was over.

I think if Brameld were with us today, he would be a principal contributor to ILR since he believed so strongly in the abundance of life, the fluidity between “the teacher and the taught,” and the need for continuing education. In this program, the “teacher” or the “presenter” is constantly learning, as he or she prepares to present a program. The students become involved with the process of study in such a way that they look for ways in which they can add to the program. In addition to the classes on theatre, film, poetry, art, and literature, there are classes on current events, “politics,” and other challenges to the democratic citizen who is determined to learn as much as possible about today’s world.

Towards New Horizons

When we planned the “Memorial Program” for Ted Brameld shortly after he died in 1987, we tried to reach as many of his extended family as possible. We invited them all to the memorial in Connecticut, and asked them to speak about the “Ted Brameld We Knew.” The dialogue was fruitful: one person said that Ted loved the music and the lyrics to a song called “Imagine;” another spoke about Brameld as a young magician; and all spoke about him as one who believed in the ever-renewing quality of life, of fresh and changing possibilities. Perhaps it was this quality of **change** and **reconstruction** and **open** exchange between “presenter” and “student” that attracted me most to the ILR. And next semester, we shall look for a “magician” to give our students a course in “magic”—a study group that Brameld himself might have wished to present—or perhaps we will present a study group on “Education in the 22nd Century,” one that Ted surely would have liked to teach!

Notes

1. This example of a teaching/learning lesson regarding the history of the revolt and the American Anti-Slavery Movement can be obtained through writing: The Education Department, New Haven Colony Historical Society, 114 Whitney Avenue, New Haven, Connecticut 06510.
2. Shields is a member of the Executive Committee of the Society for Educational Reconstruction and a recent recipient of the Langsam Reconstruction Award.