



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1980 Volume VI: The Present as History

Introduction

“The Present as History” broadly describes the shared approach which brought a group of New Haven public school teachers to a Yale classroom this spring and summer to discuss issues of common concern and to produce curricula representative of their collective commitment to quality education. Though these teachers’ classroom experience ranged over a wide variety of subjects—from multicultural education to parolee counseling—the great majority of them arrived with the hope of giving a stronger and more dramatic historical grounding to the most immediate and pressing issues in their students’ lives: work and play, race and class, politics and culture, crime and punishment, migration and settlement.

To list these topics is, in a sense, to capture that rhythm of urban life which so persistently intrudes itself into the best-laid lesson plans of the city classroom. What the Teachers Institute does, in this respect, is to bring the contemplative fruits of an academic world segregated from the hurly-burly of daily life into a setting—the urban school room—where the claims of that life seem so often overpowering as to overrule all efforts at reflection. From a material point of view, then, the Institute seems designed to distribute the products of the University’s surplus-economy into the shrinking subsistence-economy of the inner-city school system.

But what our seminar made immediately clear to me was the inadequacy of that view of things. For it was precisely our discussions of the “present” in New Haven students’ lives that revealed how much of the surplus in the University economy was “history” in the invidious sense, that is history as dead weight. The Institute thus works in two ways—as I think it should: It gives teachers a time and space in which to breathe intellectually, to enrich and renew themselves from Yale’s vast resources in a context free from the hourly ringing of bells and filling of forms. But it also gives Yale’s faculty an opportunity to re-invigorate themselves by drawing upon the energies and commitments that spring out of the urban classroom. From *that* point of view, the surplus seems to reside almost entirely in the public school. The intellectual agenda which the public school experience inspires—an agenda plainly visible in the table of contents—inevitably forces the scholar to reassess what is truly useful and compelling in an idea and what is mere academic posturing.

In short, an intellectual regeneration takes place on both sides of the Institute’s seminar table. The free exchange of our experiences, our feelings, and our ideas allows us to identify that which has become rote or unreflective drill in our teaching and to make our way toward removing it. This done, students *and* teachers can all breathe more easily.

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