

Tips for Learning at WISR

- We encourage learners to do projects they've been wanting to get around to, but haven't-for example, developing a needed, new program or writing a critically reflective autobiography on their community/work/life experience, as these experiences relate to the bigger picture.
- We encourage learners to not just study topics they want to, but also to realize that implicit in their insights are emerging theories to be communicated to others.
- We invite learners not only to write about what they're interested in, but also to write in their voice, to use the first person, to wonder and ask questions out loud on paper.
- We see learning projects as open-ended, not as "products-to-be-graded." We tell students that they may often end a paper by coming up with new questions more than definitive conclusions.
- We urge learners not to formulate thesis and project topics by what "sounds good" (e.g., not to focus on coming up with a "good" hypothesis to test, where the answer is really known in advance and can then be verified). We urge learners to search for the questions that are important to them, and to others, for the things that they are sincerely and deeply curious to learn more about.
- We try to identify with the learner and his or her concerns, and elicit from her/him some insights, questions and ideas that are interesting to them. And we challenge them, by asking them to read and think about how their concerns relate to the bigger social picture, what they see to be the pros and cons of theories of social change put forth by others, as they think about how those theories could be applied to their concerns.
- We even tend to encourage the reading of certain books and articles we have come to find useful for learners over the years-Paulo Freire, bell hooks, T.S. Kuhn, and action-research handouts written by WISR faculty, among others. Also, we are continually learning from our learners of useful books and articles that we can suggest to other learners to read. The material is more than simply male, Eurocentric material.
- What is the "politics" of the faculty, the learners and the institution. As a group, a significant majority of us could be characterized as progressive and very much to the left of center, and yet we are diverse in our politics. As an institution and a learning community, we do not have a particular "party line" nor do we have a litany of "politically correct" behaviors or positions that learners are supposed to

adhere to. Most importantly, however, unlike most institutions, we are actively hospitable and even encouraging of learning endeavors which seek to reflect on issues of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression and social injustice. We rather consciously and emphatically find ourselves supporting learning and actions which are intended to promote equality, human liberation and justice.

- We encourage learners to probe beneath the surface of things, to look concurrently at both the immediately practical tasks before us in community work and the bigger picture (society as a whole). We want learners to become more conscious of how they evaluate and judge evidence, and to be alert to get more information, to broaden their experiences. We suggest concrete research strategies for accomplishing these things.
- We also improvise and brainstorm about specific ways each student can proceed with their inquiries, when we are in the midst of thinking with them about their unfinished projects as well as their yet-to-be-formulated projects. What research methods are likely to facilitate the learner in productively addressing the questions, interests, problems, and actions with which they are engaged?
- We endeavor to help learners to do more than simply think or write about their community involvement, for we encourage them to be creative, intellectually and practically. Our students are very apt to write books and articles putting forth the insights and ideas growing out of their experience. Many work on establishing their own non-profit organization, to try to fill some unmet community need in a distinctively innovative way.
- We encourage learners to critically reflect on their community/job experience. People often get involved in routines and find it difficult to take the time and give the attention to looking beneath the surface of what they are doing, or to think about the bigger picture. We try to encourage learners to take notes on what they are doing and then write papers about their insights, and the questions, problems and challenges they encounter, what works, what doesn't work, and how their efforts might contribute to longer-term changes.
- Talking with us in one-on-one meetings is another way to get learners to reflect on what they are doing. We encourage them to talk with others, as well. In a more formal way, they often interview clients, coworkers, and others who are doing similar work, to learn about their experiences, their insights, and the concerns, questions and problems that matter to them. Often learners lead seminars at WISR to get feedback from other students and faculty on the things in which they are involved.
- We also ask learners to read what others have to say about social change, about the factors that contribute to it, and their vision of how it should happen and where it should lead. We ask them to critique these ideas and theories about social

change, in terms of what they agree and disagree with, and in terms of how these ideas relate to the specific types of activities in which the student is engaged, be it work with youth, therapy with trauma survivors, health education, or job training. In this way, students can stand back from the details of what they are doing and think about it in terms of the bigger picture.

- We are always curious to learn more about what our students are doing, both from their perspective (i.e., in terms of their knowledge and experience) and from the perspective of others engaged in the kind of efforts our student is. Our work with learners at WISR leads us to want to learn more about their particular field of study, for very often our students are more expert in their specialized area (be it the development of biracial children, the psychology of trauma, community-based health education, African culture and spirituality, or providing services to homeless families) than we are. By learning more about the learner's field, we are able to ask better questions of them, to know enough about what they are doing to ask interesting questions for ourselves, and to share our wonderings and thoughts with the student, in the role of colleagues, co-inquirers who are actively interested in scratching our heads about the problems our students care about.
- We encourage the learner to take his or her own ideas more seriously as a basis for developing theories about a topic in which he or she is an expert. Very often, people think theories are something developed by "other" people, by so-called famous people, and don't take their own insights seriously enough. Autobiographical writing, or at least writings about one's own experience, as they pertain to ideas, questions, concepts developed on a particular topic, is a good way to help students begin to develop their own theories, which they often have but don't realize that they have. We believe that most of us know more than we realize that we know, and we just need the right kinds of support and dialogue to help us become aware of our knowledge, as such, and then to articulate it.
- We spend a lot of time commenting on student rough drafts, and encourage our students to submit rough "drafts" that are still in the form of bits and pieces of as-yet unorganized ideas, as well as more polished drafts that have a beginning, middle, and end to them.
- Sometimes learners at WISR are changing fields, and we encourage them to do more research about the field or field(s) they are considering. This may involve doing interviews with others in the field under consideration-to learn more about what they do, what problems they encounter, and why they find it meaningful or challenging. Sometimes we encourage the learner to write an autobiographical piece on how their experiences have led them to the interests and concerns they are currently exploring or embracing.

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- We sometimes suggest that learners interweave reviews of literature with their own ideas-not so much to support their own ideas (which usually can be supported by examples and evidence growing out of their own rich experience) as to think about how their ideas fit in (or don't fit in) with the body of writings that other people have put forth on similar topics.
- We often encourage learners to interview others to test out their ideas, to see how others' experience is similar to or different from their own, and to use these interviews as a basis for involving others in taking some kind of action on the problems of concern to the learner.
- We try to put learners who have similar or overlapping interests in contact with each other, so they can support and learn from each other. We encourage learners to come to seminars to see how others, even with seemingly very different interests, jobs or involvements, may often share their deeply felt values and broader ideas about the society, where it is going, and where it should go. These seminars also serve as a basis for learners of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds to come together and learn more from each other because of both the differences in their life experiences and from the similarities that transcend the differences.
- We try to encourage learners not to accept "pat" answers or narrow, technical solutions to problems, whether those approaches are ones they are advocating or whether they are adopting someone else's recipe for success. We usually find when questioning students about these formulaic approaches, that the learner's deeper thoughts about the strategy are much more complex, and more subtle, but that the action advocated has been more simply stated, sometimes because the simply stated version sounds "acceptable" and similar to approaches validated by others in positions of high status or authority.