

Learning the WISR Way: The Role of Students and Faculty in Personalizing Education August 2014

Introduction: WISR's Learner-Centered, Faculty- and Learning Culture-Guided Education

WISR is renewing its commitment to learner-centered education, and in order to comply with the guidelines of accrediting agencies as we make efforts to move toward national accreditation, we are using this as an opportunity to further enhance “learning the WISR way.” Specifically, we are making more explicit the role of faculty and course-defined “scripts” (scripts=descriptions, the aims of the course, syllabi) in eliciting from learners creative and productive improvisations. We expect that this will result in learning activities which will contribute not only to the learner’s knowledge, skills and competencies, but also their sense of direction, passion for learning, and ability to be engaged in building bridges for themselves to the next important things they wish to accomplish in their lives, professionally and personally.

Beyond Goal-Oriented, Paradigm-Bound Education toward Transformative Professional Education

With the above mission and objectives in mind, WISR’s professional education is designed to be **transformative** for learners, in that they will end up accomplishing more and learning in ways that they couldn’t even fully anticipate upon enrollment. As John Dewey wrote, a sense of direction is more important as fruitful guides to learning than are goals, because as we grow and learn more, we will be better informed and any initial and very specific goals are not only imperfect, but potentially limiting. However, a sense of direction which is amenable to transformation can be highly productive. And, at WISR, faculty are experienced **mentors** in asking questions, suggesting possible directions for action and inquiry, supporting students in discovering and pursuing their own voice in writing and their sense of passion and meaning in action and inquiry.

This transformative approach to learning prepares professionals who are able to be leaders in their field—who are able both to learn and use existing professional knowledge and practices *and* who are not limited by existing paradigms and methods of practice, and are able to create new knowledge, new skills and expertise, and new ways of creatively practicing their chosen profession. In these regards, WISR aims to prepare students for professional *and* community leadership.

Course Descriptions and Syllabi: Learning Structures that are Scripts from which Students can Improvise

WISR faculty are developing course syllabi that reflect WISR's educational philosophy and mission, and the content necessary for effective professional education for the students in the degree programs we offer, and we are doing this in the context of our 40 years' of experience with personalized, learner-centered approach to professional education. **Course syllabi** are being developed to provide a coherent and clearly delineated set of required and elective courses that facilitate the study of content and methods in the student's chosen area of study and in their specializations within the broad area of study.

More specifically, **each course's syllabus** will aim to:

- 1) Engage students in studying the **content and methods that are distinctive to WISR's mission emphasizes that prospective students must seriously consider when deciding whether or not to enroll at WISR**. Specifically, this includes: a) the study and use of participatory/qualitative/action inquiry, b) theories and strategies of social change, to enable students to think about their studies and future involvements in the context of the "bigger picture," and c) the multicultural qualities of the world and communities in which we live.
- 2) ***Engage students in writing in their own voice***, in discovering and further clarifying their purposes and passions in life, work and learning.
- 3) ***Provide students with some "scripts" from which they can improvise***—in keeping with WISR's mission to provide transformative education, scripts are not used as finite, limiting requirements or perspectives for student learning, but rather as starting points for actively engaging students in further learning. The scripts serve as foundations for transformative learning, as springboards for students, where every course aims to promote student engagement in using and developing competencies in critical inquiry, curiosity and creativity. Examples of such "scripts" include defined areas of study appropriate to their chosen degree program and area of professional practice, along with required and suggested readings and videos, learning exercises and assignments, and required, culminating projects and papers
- 4) ***Give students options for how they can improvise from these scripts***, for ways of personalizing these scripts and using them as foundations for further inquiry (see point #3 above). For example, by providing them with ways to use a) their work and professional activities (including for example, participation in conferences and workshops), b) their community involvements, projects and activities, c) collaborative learning activities and projects with other WISR students, with others in their workplace and the community, and through the internet by engaging in online discussions (for example, through online communities, social media, and blogs, or with other WISR students online), and d) reflection on previous life experience [not credit for prior experiences but for the

reflection, dialogue and/or writing about these experiences and the implications for present and future]. With regard to the latter, credit-granting will consider the quantity of hours of relevant current activities, but not consider the time involved with prior activities, only the time currently involved in thinking, discussing and writing about prior activities.

The Importance of Personalized Mentoring and Coaching by WISR Faculty

The course syllabi will also build on WISR's strong history of providing WISR students with *personalized mentoring and coaching from faculty* who can help guide and support each student in ways that are at once mindful of the program and course requirements, aims, content and methods, and also of the particular purposes and needs of each learner. This will be accomplished by providing students with personalized dialogue with faculty throughout each course, along with one consistent, primary advisor who understands the "bigger picture" of where the student is in his or her progress their program of study.

The Importance of WISR's Culture: Learning the WISR Way

Finally, faculty and students will be supported in these efforts at learner-centered, script-improvisation—at personalized engagement in critical and creative inquiry, by the *WISR culture*. This culture has been developed over a period of 39 years, and we are now embarking on a new era where we aim to make this culture understandable and credible in the eyes of accreditors and other educators who are more familiar with conventional approaches. In moving in this new direction, we will have to adopt some new procedures and requirements (e.g., developing and using course syllabi that provide an *initial structure (script)* for student learning rather than having the learning emerge over time without this initial, standardized structure), and this means that our culture of "learning the WISR way" will be more important than ever. Faculty and students, as well as alumni and Board, will need to have ongoing dialogue and pay regular attention to the nuances of how the new structures and procedures are being used. These structures and procedures will need to be taken seriously and conformed to, but they can and must be used in ways that ultimately support our learner-centered approach—the aims and needs of each student, and the broad aims articulated in WISR's mission. Fortunately, we have a long history to build on, including a rich array of examples of papers, theses, transcripts and personalized syllabi in the files of alumni and advanced students. Also, many alumni remain involved with WISR, some of them as faculty. Faculty turnover is small, and most faculty have been involved at WISR for well over 10 years, and most intend to be involved for many more years. New faculty are recruited only if they demonstrate not only conventional academic and professional qualifications, but also an understanding of, appreciation for and commitment to "learning the WISR way." This is also the case with Board members.

The Important Role of Student's in Evaluating and Documenting their Learning

WISR's distinctive approach to personalized, learner-centered education has evolved out of WISR's solid, coherent and well-proven (over 40 years) learning approach. This approach engages faculty and students in collaboratively working on the development of each student's course of study, within specific courses and projects, over an extended period of time, and then with each course/project, culminating in a summary of the process and outcomes of each of the student's learning in the form of a course syllabus, written by the student and approved by the faculty member. This additional (to the beginning, faculty-written syllabus), "end of course/project" syllabus articulates what *has been studied and what has been learned and accomplished, once that project or course of study has been completed.*

WISR's Coherent Educational Philosophy and Methodology

WISR has a coherent educational philosophy and methodology that has evolved over a period of 40 years of successful educational practice, going back to the creation of the innovative Individualized Learning Program within the University of Cincinnati's College of Community Services in 1971-72. That program was developed by WISR's co-founder and long-time President, John Bilorusky (who was Assistant Professor of Urban Affairs at the University of Cincinnati from 1971-73) in collaboration with Dr. Harry Butler and some couple dozen students of that program in Cincinnati. Subsequently, WISR was founded on an educational philosophy and learning methodology, based on the lessons from the successful innovation at the University of Cincinnati, and subsequent experience by Bilorusky and two colleagues and co-founders of WISR, while they were faculty at University Without Walls-Berkeley (1973-75), where Bilorusky served as Director of Graduate Studies. Then, in 1975, they founded WISR as a "center and model for experimentation in higher education" to further develop and refine this distinctive and successful educational approach. Over the years, the details of this approach, and the associated practices, have been refined and then articulated in great detail in WISR's catalog. In addition, WISR's President, John Bilorusky, has published several key articles for the academic world on this learning methodology—most notably:

"Multicultural, Community-Based Knowledge-Building: Lessons from a Tiny Institution Where Students and Faculty Sometimes Find Magic in the Challenge and Support of Collaborative Inquiry," (with Cynthia Lawrence) in *Community and the World: Participating in Social Change*, edited by Torry D. Dickinson, Nova Science Publishers, 2003. pages 63 – 81.

“The Experimenting Community: A New Curriculum for Human Service Professionals,” (with Harry Butler). *Education and Urban Society*. February 1975, pages 117 – 140.

“Beyond Contract Curricula to Improvisational Learning,” (with Harry Butler) in *Individualizing Education Through Contract Learning*, edited by Neal Berte. University of Alabama Press, 1975, pages 144- 172.

Student Rights: Grievance Procedures

Although our personalized approach has worked very well over the years, WISR has in place grievance procedures for those extremely rare instances when students might feel that they have not been fairly or appropriately evaluated or guided by a faculty member.

[From WISR’s Current Catalog and Website: <http://www.wisr.edu/academics/sample-page-2/grading-and-awarding-academic-credit/>]

“A student may lodge a complaint (grievance) by communicating verbally or in writing to any instructor or administrator. Any such person contacted shall attempt to resolve the student’s complaint immediately. Oral and written complaints will be accepted by the Institute in any form. When submitted in writing, a simple, specific statement about the issue to be resolved should be sufficient.

If a student complains verbally and the complaint is not resolved within a reasonable time, and the student again complains about the same matter, the President of the Institute shall advise the student that the complaint must be submitted in writing. If a student complains in writing, the President of the Institute shall, within ten days of receiving the complaint, provide the student with a written response, including a summary of the Institute’s investigation and disposition of it. However, if the President is the subject of the complaint, the Chair of the Board, or a core faculty member designated by the Chair of the Board, will lead an investigation and provide the student with a written response as noted above. If the resolution requested by the student is rejected, the reasons for the rejection shall be explained.

Grievances not resolved by agreement between the student and the President of the Institute may be submitted to the WISR Board of Trustees for a final decision by the Institute.

Any questions or problems concerning this institution that have not been satisfactorily answered or resolved by the Institute should be directed to the Bureau for Private

Postsecondary Education, by calling (888) 370-7589 [toll-free] or by completing a complaint form at www.bppe.ca.gov”

[It should be noted that our procedures for student grievances and appeal have been rarely exercised by students over the years, due in large part to the effectiveness of student-faculty dialogue and collaboration on a day-to-day basis.]

Personalized Education at WISR

WISR emphasizes providing students with a personalized education, which means that each learning project, or course of study is, in part, individually designed by the student, in consultation with and under the guidance of a WISR faculty member (sometimes, when requested by the student, with the assistance of two or more faculty). Sometimes students begin their culminating paper or project with a very clear picture of what they wish to study. They may have specific readings in mind, defined learning objectives and goals, and/or a specific practical project to accomplish (e.g., develop a new program in an agency or their community, evaluate a specific program, assess the needs of a particular group of people, or plan and hold a workshop series for a particular group of clients or professionals in the field). Othertimes, students start with a less clear idea of what they wish to do, but they have some interests, questions or curiosities they wish to explore. For example, they may have a sense of a broad area they wish to study (e.g., an overview of theories of sociology, domestic violence, trauma psychology, urban agriculture, or the State MFT requirement in human development). Or, they may have questions they wish to look into (e.g., how do past traumas affect the lives of my clients, what is it that I already know and have learned that is relevant to my professional/community involvements, and that I will be better able to use and/or communicate to others if I can become more consciously aware of what I know).

In the first instance, students with a clear picture, may sometimes end up changing their plans, as they proceed to learn more, and then consult with faculty about needed or desired changes. And, those who start off less clear in their plans, will eventually, with faculty help, arrive at clear plan. In both cases, faculty guide students so that they outcomes of their learning and what they have accomplished is almost always very transformative and of excellent quality--contributing to their personal and professional goals, their progress toward the degree, and the development of the core, meta-competencies emphasized at WISR.

The Role of Faculty in Personalizing Education

WISR faculty members have several roles in personalizing education.

First and foremost, WISR faculty members ask each student questions and give them support in coming up with plans, goals, questions, activities, or even partial and ambiguously articulated ideas—that have strong meaning and importance to that student. A strong point of emphasis at WISR is to support and challenge students to engage in deep soul-searching and self-examination about what learning activities, goals, and/or questions will be most important and engaging to them (the student). Sometimes, it is also a matter of deciding what will be most engaging and important, *right now*. A student may be interested in eventually studying a particular topic, and in a particular way (e.g., certain areas of reading, certain types of professional or community activities), but right now, they have a special opportunity (e.g., in their life and work) to do something that makes a particular learning project the best one to pursue right now. For example, one student recently developed a learning project around the production of several TV shows on a local station, along with a reflective evaluation of the process and outcomes of that TV show production, because she knew that she was going to be doing those TV shows, now, rather than at a later date.

Second, once the faculty member believes that the student has come up with one or two ideas that are very important and meaningful they then make suggestions and ask further questions, so that the student will have some good starting points for this project or course of study. These suggestions/questions might include:

- 1) What work are you doing, anyway, that you can reflect on and write about as a way to get ideas and information for this project?
- 2) Are there some people with whom you can talk (informally or in formal interviews) to get relevant information, stories, ideas, further questions, suggestions for other activities or people to consult with, or recommendations for action steps?
- 3) What readings do you already know of that you wish to pursue?
- 4) Here are some readings you may want to pursue that might be helpful for these reasons _____.
- 5) Here are some people to talk with who may help you for these reasons _____.
- 6) You may want to think about these questions or issues, and here's why I'm suggesting them: _____.
- 7) You might well consider writing down insights from your previous experiences in this area, including some stories that are especially illustrative.
- 8) It might be a good idea to take notes on your observations and insights for a few minutes several times per week, in order to develop a body of material that you can use in writing about this project, later on in the process.
- 9) What "products," if any, do you have in mind that you would like to develop during this project? A handbook for other professionals, fellow staff, or clients? An article or paper to be published or presented at a conference? (In the case of a thesis . . .) as a book for professionals and/or lay people? A new program for your agency or for

your community? An evaluation of a program? A community needs assessment? A strategic plan for your agency? A video or multimedia presentation? A TV show? A radio program? A website? . . . Of course, students do not have to have a special product or an outcome—they may study a topic and/or be engaged in relevant learning activities, and then write a paper that reflects on and analyzes the insights, recommendations (if any) and questions for further study growing out of the particular learning project.

10) This is only a partial, illustrative list!

The Role of Faculty During the Process

Third, once the project is in progress, students and faculty meet regularly (typically every other week, by phone and/or face to face) to further refine and develop the student's learning project or course of study. Here are some ways in which the faculty member continues to mentor, guide and coach the student, as the learning project unfolds:

- 1) The faculty member asks, such questions as . . . Are you enjoying the work on this project? Are you learning some things that are important to you? What difficulties or frustrations are you encountering?
- 2) Depending on what the student indicates, the faculty member may brainstorm with the student about how the project can be more enjoyable/productive/meaningful, or how the challenges and frustrations might be addressed, or in some cases, the faculty member may even ask the student if they want to drop the project (altogether, or temporarily, for now) or perhaps reframe and redefine the project's emphases.
- 3) The faculty member will most likely continue to make the sorts of suggestions (on the listed 10 points above) that are sometimes made at the beginning of the learning project.
- 4) The faculty member will often ask the student questions about what they have begun to learn so far and about what new questions have occurred to them.
- 5) Indeed, as a colleague of the student in the learning endeavor, the faculty member may suggest new questions, new goals, new activities that occur to him/her (the faculty member)—these suggestions are “food for thought” for the student that they are not required to pursue, but faculty give their free advice freely, and share with students their thinking behind each bit of advice.
- 6) Sometimes students will share “in process” drafts of notes and ideas, for comment by the faculty member.
- 7) The student's primary faculty advisor for a given project may suggest other WISR faculty, adjunct faculty, WISR alumni or fellow students, or other community or professional resource people—with whom the student may wish to consult. As always, faculty will share with students the reasons for their suggestions.

The Role of Faculty at the End of the Process

Fourth, typically toward the end of the learning project, there are a few things that happen

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- 1) Faculty often discuss with students when it's time to conclude a project. Unless the student had a very clear, well-defined initial objective (e.g., read certain particular books and that only, develop a workshop series for a certain use, write a handbook for a particular use or group), it may not always be obvious when a project is "complete." In most areas, more can always be learned and more can be accomplished. So here, again, the faculty member explores with the student what is going to likely be most meaningful or important to the student. Sometimes, there is a judgement call about whether more should be done in this project, or if the student should soon turn their attention to a new project, and then, if there are further questions and areas to be studied on the current project, the student can do "part two" of this project as an additional course of study at a later date.
- 2) When the student has decided with the faculty member to conclude this project, the student submits a draft of the reflective, analytical paper that discusses this project, the main insights, the topics studied, the questions for possible further study and/or the possible courses of future action. The faculty member comments on the draft, both the content and the form (including especially the clarity and comprehensiveness with which it is written).

The Final, Written Products of the Outcome and the Process

- 3) *The student makes revisions and submits the final draft of the paper for the project/course*—electronically and a hard copy (for their official academic files).
- 4) *The student also writes an "end point" of the course of study syllabus.* Until April 2013, WISR's practice and requirement was for the student to fill out a two page syllabus form, where on page one, the student briefly describes and summarizes the project/course of study. He or she notes whether or not any seminars or workshops were attended in conjunction with the project, any libraries used or the internet for readings, and people (within WISR and/or the larger community) consulted with. The student attaches a list of their readings. On the second page, the student self-evaluates their most significant areas of learning and accomplishment during the course of study/project—overall, and in relation to some of WISR's learning missions and degree requirements.

Effective April 2013, we instituted a new practice which involves students providing much more extensive and detailed information pertaining to a

number of questions about the process and outcomes of the learning on each project (i.e., in each course of study).

The “End-of-Course/Project” Syllabus Form!!

- 5) Here, the student describes the most important learning activities pursued in the course, along with some self-evaluative comments about the process and outcomes of the learning. The faculty member signs the student’s version of the course syllabus—attesting to the accuracy of its contents, based on the faculty member’s intense and continuing involvement in the learning process with the student through the entire time.

Final Products

The student’s academic file contains the original, faculty-written course syllabus, the student-written, faculty-verified final course syllabus form that attests to the content and processes of what the student studied and learned, the student’s completed course assignments, and the final paper written by the student to reflect on and analyze the primary content studied. In some cases, there will be additional products, such as when a student develops a workshop outline, a new program, or a multimedia presentation.

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EXCERPTS FROM WISR CATALOG/WEBSITE—regarding methods of faculty mentoring and advising, course syllabi, the evolution of student projects and the optional use of tentative plans . . .

Mentoring and Advising at WISR

[From: <http://www.wisr.edu/mentoring-and-advising-page-2/>]

“By individualized, we mean that learners choose and direct their own program. Although the program is self-paced, self-assigned and self-regulated, we, as faculty, take a major role by maintaining close contact with the learner to work with them in assessing their progress and process. Students meet often with one or several of the faculty, one-on-one, and the meeting is almost always a cooperative and collaborative learning experience. It makes us smile to note that when one of our learner’s forgets to put their name on their paper, we easily recognize whose paper it is by the content and style. We are so intimately involved in student learning that we know many of the nuances of each learner’s thinking, and indeed, it is interesting that students are so sure that we will know that they wrote a particular paper, that our students often “forget” (don’t bother?) to put their names on the

papers they hand in. Because learners are given the opportunity, indeed encouraged, to think about what they want to learn and accomplish, they often arrive at more clarity about their ideas and the directions in which they are headed. At the same time, we as faculty actively and enthusiastically share thoughts that spring from our interests, curiosities and commitments, but as they might pertain to the interests of the particular learner with whom we are meeting.

All-in-all there are some themes that characterize the subtle, emerging combination of challenge and support that we give to our students. These themes are not facile techniques, nor cut-and-dried formulas that we “implement” on a day-to-day basis, rather they are some of the things that we have become aware of as recurring patterns in the ways we try to work with our students, and qualities underlying the learning relationships with them. This list of themes is not an exhaustive one. The themes could have been listed in any sequence, or categorized in any of a number of different ways. This list should be read in the way that one would study a mosaic, or perhaps a kaleidoscope of patterns. Looked at in different ways, each part provides us with an additional perspective on the other parts and on the total “picture.” In thinking about the items on this list, the reader may want to keep in mind such notions as exploration, reflection, creativity, engagement, inquisitiveness, social justice, collaboration, open-endedness and emergence. What other qualities come to mind as you read this?

- 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’s 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 immediate, 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 involvements, 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.

- 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.

- 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.

- 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." [quote taken from article written by WISR faculty members, John Bilorusky and Cynthia Lawrence: "Multicultural, Community-Based Knowledge-Building: Lessons from a tiny institution where students and faculty sometimes find magic in the challenge and support of collaborative inquiry" from *Community and the World: Participating in Social Change*, Torrey Dickinson (ed.), Nova Science Publishers, 2003]

Use of Course Syllabi at WISR

Until April 2013, the practice and policy regarding the Course Syllabus were as follows:

"Each WISR student is required to write a course syllabus [pdf] [doc] at the completion of each project for which credit is awarded. This course syllabus [pdf] [doc] includes the following: 1) what they accomplished or learned during the project (in about one to two paragraphs); 2) more specifically, what they accomplished or learned in relation to WISR's degree requirements as stated in the official catalogue, and pertaining to other, related educational purposes, objectives, outcomes and competencies discussed in such official WISR documents as the catalogue, the application for State Reapproval, and other documents distributed by faculty to students; 3) a list of books and articles they read; 4) a list of relevant seminars, workshops, or conferences attended at WISR or elsewhere (if applicable); 5) any pertinent job, volunteer or other community or professional

experiences; 6) the resource people and libraries used, as well as the “types” of people interviewed (where applicable). The faculty advisor signs the course syllabus and approves of its accuracy, or if it is incomplete or inaccurate, returns it to the student for the appropriate revisions. The student’s faculty advisor or faculty member supervising the project also attaches the Project Evaluation Form, which contains their comments.”