

“Theory and Praxis: Education for Action in a Diverse and Changing World”

Elizabeth Schmidt, Department of History

Nachbahr Award Lecture

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Father Linnane, Vice President Snyder, Deans Buckley and Dahringer, friends, colleagues, parents, and students, I want to thank you all for gathering today to celebrate the achievements of the Loyola College community. As the 2007 recipient of the Nachbahr Award, I am honored—and humbled—to be among those recognized. Since 1996, Loyola has honored its faculty with an annual award for outstanding scholarly or creative achievement in the Humanities, named for Bernard Nachbahr, a dedicated member of the Loyola community who served as a distinguished professor of philosophy, first director of Loyola’s Center for the Humanities, and founding director of the Loyola-Katholieke Universiteit international house in Leuven, Belgium. It was Professor Nachbahr’s hope that the international living arrangement would promote intercultural exchange and understanding, helping to transform our students into “agents of peace, progress, and prosperity,” whose mission is to create a better world. I am honored to be part of this legacy—and especially to be the first female faculty member to receive the Nachbahr Award!

Each year, the Nachbahr award recipient is tasked with developing a lecture about the “Life of the Mind.” As you can see from the title of my talk, “Theory and Praxis: Education for Action in a Diverse and Changing World,” I have hedged. Like many of my distinguished predecessors, I have distanced myself from the notion of ivory-towered academics set apart from the world around them. Last year, for instance, Philosophy professor Drew Leder spoke eloquently of “the Life of the Mind in the Year of the City.” Before that, Chinese historian Keith Schoppa warned us against cultural-boundedness—that is, seeing the world only through the

distorted lens of our own experiences. Indeed, Bernard Nachbahr himself was a man of both reflection and action. Likewise, it is Loyola's mission as a Jesuit-Mercy Catholic university to form men and women who are "contemplatives in action," people who are "in the world," not the cloister or the ivory tower. Loyola emphasizes the care of the whole person—*cura personalis*—the education of the body and spirit as well as the mind. It teaches students that the "examined life of the intellectual" is a prerequisite for positive social action and that it is Loyola's goal to "inspire students to learn, lead, and serve in a diverse and changing world."

Although the Jesuit-Mercy tradition is not part of my family's background, many of its tenets resonate with the tradition of social activism in which I was raised. "The life of the mind"—well, I couldn't escape that, try as I might. My father was a history professor, and my mother, a librarian. Both had come from working class backgrounds and were the first in their families to attend college. My paternal grandfather, a tool and die maker in Germantown, Louisville, Kentucky, had only a few years of schooling before he was forced to quit to help support his family. My maternal grandmother, a secretary in Cincinnati, Ohio, was a single parent who worked hard to put both her daughters through college. My father, a World War II veteran, won a scholarship to college and went to graduate school on the G.I. bill. Today, as always, I am wearing my father's cap and gown—and the hood my mother made for him when he received his doctorate more than 50 years ago, because they couldn't afford to buy one. (Recognizing the school colors, a savvy Loyola administrator once confronted me with, "You didn't go to the University of Pennsylvania!" True, but wearing my father's—and mother's—hood has much greater meaning for me than wearing my own.)

Both my parents prized the life of the mind they had struggled so hard to obtain. But they did not forget the communities from which they had come or become blind to the privilege their family now had. Children of the sixties, my sister and I were raised in a household where books, art, music, and social activism were the norm. I watched and learned as my parents involved themselves in the civil rights and antiwar movements and fought against urban and environmental decay. During that period in my life, the push toward social justice had a profoundly secular ring. In college, I was influenced by the 19th century German philosopher and social scientist, Karl Marx, who posited that the true goal of the philosophical endeavor was political action, claiming that “philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” And, the great Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, who wrote in his classic work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that education is the foundation of human liberation and that, for a transformative pedagogy, theoretical learning is not sufficient. Intellectual lessons need to become part of lived experience through a process called “praxis”-- that is, “the action and reflection of men [and women] upon their world in order to transform it.” Later, in 1980, I would work at the Center of Concern, a Jesuit-founded social justice research organization, where I learned about another form of social analysis that linked faith to justice through the pastoral “circle of praxis,” a model developed from the insights of Freire and the Jesuit liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo.

Needless to say, my folks were not terribly thrilled when, in the course of my expensive private college education, I decided that living in a tractor shed and working on a vegetable farm was the life for me! But my roots were too strong for the escapism of the cloister, ivory tower, or subsistence farm to take hold. Although I begrudgingly majored in history, I was determined

not to follow too closely in my father's footsteps. I had no intention of becoming an academic! By the late 1970s, I was living in Washington, D.C., using my research, writing, and analytical skills at an activist think-tank, where my focus was the role of U.S. corporations in supporting white minority-rule in South Africa. It was there that I learned the real power of the word. The Africa Project was discontinued when the think-tank's leadership felt that its work was jeopardizing the organization's funding base. The book that I wrote there, as a tool for the U.S. anti-apartheid movement, was subsequently banned in South Africa, where the government considered it a danger to the political and economic order. When the Maryknoll Fathers sent me to South Africa in 1981 to write for their mission magazine, I was followed by the security police, who seemed to think that I was a threat to their system. (Although I managed to get out of South Africa unscathed, I was not able to return until after apartheid fell. My second trip to South Africa was 25 years after the first.)

I had discovered my passion for Africa, but not how to keep a job. I was told that without "credentials"—that is, more than a B.A. in American history—I would be lucky to get even short-term contract work. So, I backed into academia through the anti-apartheid movement. In 1981, I enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin. Moving north from South Africa, where I had become persona non grata, I conducted my doctoral research in Zimbabwe. Later, I moved on to French-speaking Guinea and Senegal in West Africa.

And, despite my adolescent vow not to be an academic, I began to teach. (My father was thrilled.) Arriving at Loyola in 1991, I quickly discovered that my intellectual and activist lives did not need to be mutually exclusive. In keeping with the Jesuit-Mercy traditions of the college, Catholic social teachings, and my own humanist perspective, I strove to built my courses on a

solid ethical foundation. My central objective has been to open my students to new ways of seeing the world, exposing them to different value systems and worldviews, sensitizing them to the humanity of “the other” and the validity of other cultures. I have attempted to show them that the Western way is not the only way, that we have much to learn from other peoples, who have different ways of expressing their humanity. (According to the Ignatian worldview, this would mean “openness and enthusiasm toward the whole of God’s richly diverse creation and for the human person as its crowning glory.”) All of my courses examine the encounters of the West with Africa, exposing the ways in which those encounters denigrated African peoples and their cultures. This denigration, combined with powerful ideological and religious justifications, resulted in political, economic, and social domination, first through the institution of slavery, then, in the nineteenth century, through conquest, colonization, and conversion. In the contemporary world, the continued domination of Africa by the industrialized nations is evident in the deeply rooted poverty and material underdevelopment that characterizes much of the continent today.

Most of my students have never been to Africa, known an African person, or even studied the continent. For years I struggled over ways to help them understand Africans’ values, experiences, and worldviews. I knew that videos, which provided images, but not empathy, were a sorry substitute for real people. With a view to educating the whole person (*cura personalis*), I knew that people were the key. Quite belatedly, I must confess, I turned to Loyola’s Center for Community Service and Justice, which, among its many important functions, houses the Office of Service-Learning.

The synthesis of theory and praxis and the promotion of “education for action” are nowhere more evident at Loyola than in the “engaged scholarship” of the service-learning program. According to definitions approved by Loyola’s Council of Academic Deans in November 2005, “...service-learning refers to experiential learning within academic courses that is gained through structured reflection on community-based service....Essential components of service-learning include: learning and service which enhance one another, reciprocal partnership with the community, and meaningful, structured reflection....Service-learning courses at Loyola intentionally contribute to those Undergraduate Educational Aims which promote justice, diversity, leadership and social responsibility. These values are central to the Jesuit educational mission of Loyola College and of all Jesuit colleges and universities.” This was precisely what I had been seeking!

Although I introduced service-learning into my African history courses for the first time during the spring 2005 semester, I had considered the option for many years. I had hesitated, because many of the wonderful programs with which Loyola currently partners are involved with largely American populations. I was concerned that if my students worked with these programs, their experiences might contribute to, rather than dismantle, common stereotypes by confounding African and African American communities. As a result, rather than collaborating with one of Loyola’s existing partners, I searched the web. Googling “Africa-refugees-Baltimore,” I found a number of organizations that assisted newly arrived refugees and asylees in our community. Eventually, I determined that the best fit for my students was what is now called the Refugee Youth Project, a Baltimore City Community College-sponsored after-school tutoring program for elementary and middle school and aged youth, most of whom are African refugees.

Structured, continuous reflection is a critical component of service-learning, much like Freire's praxis cycle: action--reflection--action. After each tutoring session, students write in their service-learning journals, reflecting on their experiences and their relationship to the course's academic content. In class, students have frequently referred to their service-learning experiences, astutely relating their observations to the course material. Many have claimed that their experiences were among the most rewarding of their college years--or even their lives! Others claimed that the experiences were life-changing, altering perspectives and career goals. Several former service-learning participants are now working in the Teach for America program in inner-city schools. Another has enrolled in law school, with plans to study international or immigration law. Yet another plans to attend social work school and work with immigrant populations.

All of this brings us back to "the life of the mind," which, in the tradition of *cura personalis*, must be integrated with the rest of human experience. Just as Ignatius celebrated the notion of "contemplatives in action," Loyola today promotes the practice of "engaged scholarship." We teach our students that theory without praxis and education without action are not in the Jesuit tradition that we all embrace.