

**A Study and Evaluation of Eleven Academic Courses
of
ACADEMY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

Executive Summary

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This evaluation study continues the work begun by the mapping research conducted during 2004-2005 on student activism in the community (Golan-Agnon et al, 2005). The mapping study noted that the majority of student activism in the community remains disconnected from academic knowledge and research conducted by institutions for higher learning in Israel. It was found that to date, no comprehensive examination has been undertaken to examine to what degree students contribute to the community or to the academic institutions, nor has there been a proper evaluation of the ways in which the students benefit from these activities. This evaluation wishes to begin to address this oversight, collect cumulative knowledge, and outline the lessons learned, regarding both the content and teaching methods employed in academic courses that encourage social engagement.

FINDINGS

Students

The study found that courses that integrate student action in organizations for social change strengthen the degree of students' social commitment. Likewise, the research found that students are thirsty for theoretical content to guide their work in the community. Students often pointed to this aspect of their program in order to explain why a course was significant for them. It appears, then, that as the theoretical content corresponds more clearly to the nature of the community work, and as the possibilities for application of the theoretical content are clearer to the student—whether in the community or in research—their satisfaction with the course is greater, and so is the importance they place upon the course and upon engagement in the community.

Surprisingly, however, the research revealed that subsequently to the program, students' perception of their ability to work towards social justice and human rights actually decreased. Based on a comprehensive analysis of the data, we offer two explanations for this result. First, it is possible that a lack of dynamic, continuous and constant guidance of the students on the part of some of the partners—both teaching staff and representatives of the organizations—contributed to this result. Active guidance would allow students to process their experiences, to connect them to the theoretical materials, and to engage with material involving value judgments, and with their sense of identity and personal worldviews. An additional explanation may be found in the identity transformation processes that the students underwent throughout the program. According to this explanation, at the end of the academic year the student was still in the throes of a changing personal identity, and therefore experienced confusion and instability regarding the content and experiences absorbed throughout the year. It is possible that over time, assuming that the process continues, the student's identity will continue to be shaped and constructed, and he or she will re-acquire a belief in their personal ability to foster social change or to participate in such a process of change.

Teaching Staff

We found that the teaching staff experienced an unusually heavy work load, particularly in comparison to the workload involved in courses that do not integrate student action in the community. In addition

to the “traditional” faculty duties expected in the academy, these courses also require a long string of tasks particular to working with the organizations in which the students are active: ensuring a continuous connection with the organizations, guiding and following-up student activities, and displaying sensitivity to the connection between social action in the field and the theoretical content of the course. In our opinion, all of this requires a large teaching staff for each course, and new role definitions that differ from those known and acknowledged by the academy.

Courses

Drawing the connections between theoretical content and students’ personal experiences in the community is one of the key elements of the courses evaluated this year, and one of the primary factors in student satisfaction. Nonetheless, we found that at times the links between the theory and the community work were not sufficiently clear. In extreme cases, we encountered "splits" made by students, who “gave up” on the significance of the theoretical content or on their community action, in order to contend with the dissonance they felt between theory and practice.

Another central finding related to the courses was the students’ perception that their participation in classroom discussion was less than they would have wished. Similarly, students felt that the courses sometimes present a distressingly unified voice, which does not acknowledge the range of political opinions and positions to be found in the class. At times students felt that they could not express opinions that differed from those of the professor. We found that students who chose to oppose the authoritative voice of the faculty member may have become outsiders in the group, bearing alone the label of “otherness,” while the other students did not genuinely examine their opinions or feelings. Alternatively, standpoints that students accepted as a result of identification with the faculty member were not deeply examined. These findings demonstrate the importance of promoting dialogical instruction focusing upon the student, and the importance of creating diverse educational spaces within the framework of the course—spaces that allow students to process both the theoretical and the emotional components.

Organizations and the Community

We found that at times the students’ contribution to the organizations was far-reaching, and substantively different from the contribution of volunteers whose work is not guided by an academic course. This occurred mainly when the course’s faculty was consistently involved in the students’ community activism, adding a theoretical and research dimension to their work in the field. These cases were particularly valued by the organizations, and as a result they developed a strong desire to continue the partnership with the academy.

Nonetheless, we found that the students required a significant investment on the part of the organizations. The students were not always considered an “asset” that the organization received from the partnership, but in fact a “source of investment” on its part, in addition to its ongoing activities. Additionally, we found that a large segment of the organizations did not know how to work with students, which at times resulted in misunderstandings as to the students’ place in the organization, and

even a lack of appropriate support for the students on the part of certain organizations. Therefore, we must emphasize the importance of a **joint and continuing discussion between the academic staff and the representatives of the organizations.**

Such a discussion may serve as a framework for consensus on the following matters:

1. The importance of continuous guidance for the student by the organization throughout the year.
2. Prior understanding of the time and resources that the organization will need to invest in the student.
3. Understanding the unique role of the student whose work is guided by an academic course, in contrast to the position of other volunteers working with the organization.
4. Strengthening frameworks for a joint discussion and exchange of information.

The Academic Institution

The courses in the program wish to receive the appropriate recognition from the academic institution; however, the majority expressed discomfort from the extent of recognition and support that they receive today. Often the faculty felt that the courses' continued existence depended upon constant proof of their success and necessity. In some of the courses, we found a lack of involvement on the part of leading individuals in the academy, and difficulty in reward for the faculty by the academy for the extra work involved in teaching courses that integrate student action in the community.

At the same time, we found that when faculty members invested constant and focused efforts in "marketing" their course within the academic institution, they encountered great success in generating recognition and commitment from leading individuals in the institution (even if not immediately, at least towards the end of the academic year). In our view such action is important to make the institution recognize the need for a special framework of courses that focus on student activism within the community. In this way the course can receive the "patronage" of the department, and in the future can substantially be based upon the resources of the academic institution.

Regarding this issue, we found differences between the language used by the faculty members and students of the courses and the language used by leading figures in the academy when describing the courses in the program. When describing the course's activities from their own perspective, the course's faculty spoke of "social justice," while other academics were likely to speak in the language of "charity" and the importance of "contributing to the community".

DISCUSSION

Part I: Partnerships

The action of partnership in the social and public sphere charges this association with value-oriented meanings; indeed, the partnership can become a value in and of itself. Moreover, as is the case in other cross-sectoral partnerships, "Academy-Community Partnership" challenges the relations between sectors in society, and competes for a place on the public agenda and for the resources to promote its agenda

(Talias et al, 2007—in print). Below is a summary of the discussion regarding the issue of partnership between the academy and the community.

- **Knowledge as a resource:** Our impression is that knowledge is one of the central resources that are transferred, consumed, and created in the “Academy-Community Partnership.” The transfer of knowledge can be **one-directional**, when a specific partner—the academy or the community—possesses the knowledge and transfers it to the other partner. The transfer of knowledge can also be **two-directional**—the knowledge flows both from the field to the academy and vice-versa.
- **Human resources:** We found that students require a substantial investment on the part of the organizations that integrate them. On occasion the students are not necessarily considered an “asset” that the organizations gain from the partnership, but rather a “source of investment”, in addition to their ongoing activities. Moreover, we found that a large segment of the organizations does not know how to work with students, which at times can lead to misunderstandings regarding the place of the students in the organization, and even a lack of appropriate support for the students on the part of certain organizations.
- **Joint dialogue between the faculty members and the organizations:** Prior understanding of the time and resources that the organization needs to invest in the student is essential for the success of the partnership. It is the faculty’s role to make the organization aware of the unique position of the student, a position different from that of other volunteers in the organizations. To do so, it is imperative to ensure joint dialogue with the representatives of the organization regarding the student’s action within the organization.
- **Potential for innovation:** Our impression is that one of the main benefits that the partners find in the “Academy-Community Partnership” is the way in which the partnership opens new opportunities for action and research in realms that were not previously accessible, and exposes them to new aspects of knowledge creation and practice that were not previously clear or known.
- **Responsibility for the partnership:** The responsibility for cultivating the relationship was always placed upon the academic party and not on the organization. The burden of responsibility was solely placed on one side of the partnership, and sometimes even on one specific faculty member, which placed an enormous burden upon him or her. Therefore, prior to the beginning of the year it is important to reach an agreement with the organization regarding the time and human resources that it will need to invest in ongoing guidance of the students, and to make it clear at the outset that “the course does not bear sole responsibility for the relationship.” It is possible to arrange specific dates throughout the year to examine the students’ activities, to allow for joint reflection and the possibility for change as needed.
- **Working with the faculty:** The courses in the program wish to receive appropriate recognition from the academic institution; but the majority expressed discomfort from the extent of recognition and support that they receive today. At times the faculty felt that the continuation of the course was dependant upon constant proof of their success and necessity. In some of the courses, we found a lack of involvement of leading individuals in the academia, and difficulty of

faculty members in being rewarded for the extra work involved in teaching a course that integrates students action in the community.

- **Ideological aspects:** In our opinion, one of the central distinctions that the “Academy-Community Partnership” is required to make in this regard is the distinction between **political tendency/beliefs** and **political commitment**. The Partnership is not intended to influence the students’ political beliefs; political commitment should be its object of influence.

Part II: Developing a Theory of Work in the Field

Courses that integrate student activism in organizations for social change are a new phenomenon in the Israeli academic scene. We are under the impression that there is a **need to develop a theory of work in the field** that will map the structures and models of partnership with the community, lay out guidelines for future courses that wish to integrate students work in organizations for social change, and serve as a basis for improving the existing courses. In this section we discuss the main aspects we identify regarding this topic; we extracted a list of working principles that we identified while evaluating the courses which are appropriate for use in cooperation with organizations in the field:

A. Mapping of organizations in the field and formulating criteria for joint work.

B. Contacting the organization and verifying the feasibility of the relationship: As of today, the initial contact with the organization to create the partnership had been done at the initiative of the courses’ faculty. Very rarely has the process been reversed, wherein the organization contacts the faculty and requests to integrate students in its activities.

C. A written contact with the organization: It is our impression that it is important to insist on the drafting of a formal contract with the organization in which the student is placed.

D. Student placement in an organization: Expectations should be coordinated between the course’s faculty, the student, and the organization. In addition, the participants in the course should meet with representatives of all of the organizations. Finally, there should be joint decision-making by the faculty, the students, and the organizations’ representatives.

E. Guidance of the student’s integration in the organization: When the student enters the organization, it is important that the faculty member or teaching assistant guide him or her closely, identify problems, and encourage the organization and the student to begin working as early as possible.

F. Creating space for joint discussion and reflection: It is important to encourage constant dialogue between the faculty of the course and the organization, so that the partnership will be viewed as a partnership between the course and the organization, not just between the organization and the student.

G. Constant guidance of the students’ action: Guiding the students in the organizations throughout the process is most important for their substantive action.

H. In addition to all of the above, the students’ work in the organizations should be **documented**, accomplishments should be **shared with the organizations**, and an organized **summative meeting** should be held with the course’s faculty and the representatives of the organizations.

Part III: Learning

The common pedagogic denominator of the courses that are part of the “Academy-Community Partnership” is that they see student action in the community as an integral part of the pedagogy of the course, and not just a “contribution to the community” which accompanies the academic contents. The courses that we evaluated this year challenge the accepted pedagogy in the academy, which is based on a clear distinction between student and teacher, on an assumption that learning necessarily occurs in a classroom environment, and on a paradigm in which knowledge is created through analysis of purely intellectual-universal-objective content.

The Connection between Theory and Practice

The connection between theoretical content and the students’ personal experiences in the community is one of the key elements of the courses evaluated this year. In our estimation, not all of the courses managed to maintain a similar level of integration between theory and practice; we noted that the majority of the courses found it difficult to integrate the two aspects to some extent. For instance, the students often claimed that the theory was “too general” for them, and it was difficult for them to draw the connections to the experiences in the community.

We found that guidance of the students was essential for the project’s successful implementation in the communities in which the students were involved. According to the organizations’ staff, the daily action tends to focus on problems of the “here and now”, on the need to offer immediate solutions, and does not always take into account a wider context. Students noted the need for meetings that would focus on planning and thinking in the broader sense. Scheduling meetings ahead of time to plan specifically for the future could allow for the formulation of long-term work policy, programs and goals.

The Importance of Dialogical Instruction

Dialogical instruction is a method which uses experiences and emotions as the basis for group work, and it allows for processing conflicts within a supportive environment. Throughout the year, we found that the courses used dialogical instruction to various extents: sometimes, we found that the faculty member’s desire to preserve a high academic level conflicted with the space set aside for dialogue and emotional processing within the group. At times the lecturers’ fear that conflicts would flood the classroom prevented the development of significant dialogical teaching.

In our view teaching theories relating to social justice and human rights are an imperative stage, specifically when students have not been sufficiently exposed to such ways of thinking. Dialogical teaching, however, focuses on the student and leaves less room for conveying given bodies of knowledge in a systematic fashion. One possible solution to this tension—between the need to bequeath knowledge and the need to conduct dialogue—is to educate in two pedagogic frameworks concurrently, in other words, constantly processing students’ emotions in the wake of the encounter between the theoretical content and the experiences on the ground.

Dynamics versus Authority

Formal meetings: The relationship between the course's staff and the students was characterized in most of the courses by high accessibility by the faculty, and an impressive responsiveness to the needs of the students. However, in a significant number of the courses no organized and regular meetings were conducted between the faculty and the students. We found that many courses were characterized by informal contacts between students and course staff. Therefore, students who were or were passive in groups avoided turning to the staff, and therefore were less likely to develop a connection with them. It is our impression that courses that scheduled personal discussions between the students and the faculty, and organized visits to the organizations, managed to create a support structure that was more egalitarian and better suited for all students in the course.

Expressing diverse voices: The faculty member's voice greatly influences the degree of diversity in the students' viewpoints. In many cases, an artificial unity of voices regarding certain topics was created. Alternatively, the positions that the students adopt, out of identification with the lecturer, are not deeply examined. Individuals who choose to oppose the authoritative voice adopted by the majority of the students are likely to become the group's "scapegoat." While they alone hold all the "otherness," the difference, the rest of the students have no opportunity to truly examine their opinions and feelings.

The Evolving Discourse with the Community

This chapter discusses the issue of the students' encounter with the "fourth world": how can we ensure that the discussion does not become a discussion "about" the community for whose benefit the students are working, and instead become a discussion "with" this community. It is our impression that the academy does not require its partners in the organizations to be equal partners in their work with the students. Therefore, there is no cooperation in decision-making regarding projects that are supposed to be joint between the academy and the community. However, some courses have successfully created more inclusive partnerships with the community: initiatives such as integrating community representatives in discussions and lectures in the classroom, organizing tours with the organizations' representatives, and conducting joint study days contributed greatly to fostering an equal discussion with the community.

The discussion with the community requires a different expertise than that which is necessary for internal institutional or academic discourse. It seems that many students found it difficult to learn the community's discourse, although in many cases the students' abilities to speak in two languages, i.e. the language of the establishment and the language of the community, led to greater negotiation between the community and the establishment. In such a way the academy served as a tool that brought the establishment and the society closer. For instance, students participating in the courses organized conferences, where community representatives were speakers of equal status to the representatives of the establishment.

The Development of a Community of Practice

A community of practice is one which binds together around professional topics. Its purpose is to reinforce learning processes, to support colleagues, and to strengthen them through inter-personal and group relationships. We feel that the forum's meetings serve as a place that allows for **mutual inspiration** between faculty members. However, many lecturers note that they feel that the forum's influence on their practice is peripheral at best, and they have difficulties understanding how they could use the existing forum. From conversations with faculty members, it seems that greater and closer mutual support is needed—among the courses' staff—than that which currently exists. Moreover, some of them emphasize that personal mentoring is lacking in the program. Finally, according to certain staff members, the group discussions do not include enough direct talk about difficulties and problems, which makes it hard to create an open environment and intimacy.

Part IV: Change

The following section deals with the relationship between the change that takes place within the courses, viewed as organizations, and the change that the organizations lead externally. In our view, the relationship between the organization and its environment cannot be disconnected, and therefore the students experience the organizational culture within their course, and are influenced by it when working in the community—and vice versa: their work in the community influences the course.

- **Local versus global change:** In this section, we discuss whether local change brings about global change. We found that the individual student serves as an address for transferring change to the environment, but externalizing that change beyond the “Academy-Community Forum” requires great sensitivity and attentiveness to the messages. Students explain that discussions about the course's content with external persons require the adoption of a sensitive approach. According to them, in order for the opinions they acquire in the course to be heard, they must adopt an attitude of moderation and patience, and not convey a feeling of blame and offense towards society.
- **Change as adaptation to the environment:** The “Academy-Community Partnership” organization is evolving. In this section, we discuss how the course's ambition to adapt, to balance itself, and to become “routine,” influences its goal of affecting political, social, and institutional change. It seems that the contradiction between the course's internal goals and its external goals led the work with the community in the field to become unclear as the relations formed. The paradox that is inherent in a course that attempts to stabilize and adapt itself, and at the same time tries to change the external environment, impacts the relationship between the students and the organizations.
- **Change under pressure:** Throughout the year, the faculty reported that they felt anxiety and uncertainty regarding budgetary and institutional concerns. As a result, the courses often concentrated on the “now,” on local solutions of problems, in an attempt to “put out fires”; and it was noticeably difficult to follow a long-term plan, one connected to a broad perspective. Over the year, when the uncertainty and pressure began to dissipate, the organizational work of the courses began to be done in a more structured manner, with a future-oriented perspective, and less focused on immediate solutions.

- **Change in the academy:** The issue at hand here is the degree of influence of the “Academy-Community” forum upon the academy. It is our impression that the success of the courses and the way in which the courses are perceived by external bodies is a central condition for the creation of change within the academy. For the academic institution to consider a course in a positive manner, it must of course be in demand by the students, but it also must be based on the development of a good relationship between external bodies, and must have good standing within the academy. In order to do so, active measures must be taken: inviting academic individuals to become acquainted with the course, initiating conferences, and participating in academic events.

It’s All About Identity

This section deals with the question of how the courses that are part of the “Academy-Community Partnership” influence the students’ identity. There is great variety in the courses’ influence over the students, and in the feelings that they provoked; some students expressed great frustration, while others voiced their wonderment and amazement. Nevertheless, there was a general consensus that the courses had a vast influence on the emotions and experiences of the students.

In what follows we suggest a possible model for the experiences that the students in the courses undergo:

The Dismantling Stage— When the students are exposed to the contents of the courses and to the work in the field, they begin to undergo a process of conceptual dismantling/deconstruction. The exposure creates discomfort, frustration, fear, anxiety and uncertainty about the students’ previous beliefs.

The Searching Stage— The students look to reconstruct their identity, which will serve as a support/backing for dealing with their discomfort. This process is accompanied by confusion, a lack of clarity, and a search for a group to which they can belong, and a community of practice that will be integrated with their newly acquired perceptions.

The Construction Stage— The directing of the discomfort into the experiential semantics of practice. The students adopt a complex attitude towards their environment, an attitude that they adopted during the searching stage, and find their place by grappling with a new worldview that they adopted. At this stage the students adopt an attitude of awareness towards their choices, develop a stance about their ability to influence and change their surroundings.

The Necessary Conditions for Building the Process of Identity

The process of identity construction will be more significant if the following conditions are met: students have less previous acquaintance with the material; there is a more comprehensive link between learning and action; an open setting is created to allow the students to contain their frustration; and finally, if frustrating and difficult experiences may be channeled into learning and development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations summarize our analysis of the findings in the study. They deal with each of the substantive factors in the partnership: the courses, the students, the faculty members, the organizations, and the academic institution.

The following are the principal recommendations that appear in the report:

Recommendations for the Courses

- We recommend that the faculty members emphasize the theoretical aspects that are relevant to the experience in the field.
- It is important to combine a variety of settings for learning and processing within the general framework of the course.
- We recommend that internal group conflicts be viewed as valuable to the group, and not as disturbing factors.
- We recommend creating continuing frameworks for the students.

Recommendations for the Students

- We recommend limiting the number of organizations to which each course sends the students.
- The course's staff should hold organized meetings with the students as an integral part of the course, during the faculty member's and teaching assistant's regular office hours.
- We recommend that when choosing organizations greater emphasis be placed on the organization's willingness to commit in advance to guide and support the students, and that organizations demonstrate utmost commitment to this matter.
- It is important to create frameworks of support, settings for students to process their emotions.
- From the data of the courses evaluated this year, it seems that there is an overwhelming female majority. We recommend focusing on how to recruit male students, and ensure that there is not a predominance of courses that deal with a specific aspect of social change.

Recommendations for the Faculty

- We recommend that each faculty member have an equal part in teaching the course—each in his or her own field or expertise.
- We believe it is valuable to include persons from the social change organizations in the academic staff of the course.
- We recommend holding guidance for faculty members through mentoring - for faculty members interested.

Recommendations for Working with the Organizations

- It is worthwhile making sure that the action is for “change” and not “preservation.”
- The faculty members should formulate a work contract with the organization.
- Students should be encouraged to attend the organization's social functions, staff meetings and encounters, above and beyond their defined work hours.

Recommendations for Working with the Academic Institution

- "Marketing" actions within the academic institutions should be advanced.
- The place of theory and research as an integral aspect of students' work in the field should be emphasized to the academic institution.
- In discussions with the academy, the course's goal of promoting political commitment, as distinguished from encouraging a specific political viewpoint, should be emphasized.

Recommendations for the "Partnership Forum"

- We recommend strengthening the process of personal mentorship among the faculty, and organizing additional meetings for the faculty, on a geographical or topic-based division.
- We recommend developing databases of knowledge that is relevant for the organizational aspects of the Partnership.
- The forum's organizers should help create joint spaces/settings to allow for the evolution of a professional community of lecturers of the courses.
- We recommend inviting representatives of the organizations to become more active partners in the "Partnership Forum."

Recommendations for Further Research

We suggest that future research focus on the "off-campus" aspects of the program, as a long-term study of the students, to examine their integration into Israeli society as adults in comparison to a control groups. Likewise, we suggest administering a research study whose focal point is the student, and not the course.