

Awareness & Action: Experiences of an informal learning format in a public school --

HASTA (Hopeful Aware Students Taking Action)

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Biographical Notes:

I have been a teacher in the public high school system in Manitoba since 1990, including 19 years in the Immersion française program at École secondaire Kelvin. My interest in social justice and sustainability stems from my involvement with Jeunesse Canada Monde/Canada World Youth and my research as a Commonwealth Scholar in Sri Lanka (1985-1990).

One of many challenges facing learning communities in Manitoba is that of incorporating the key themes of sustainable development into the public education system in meaningful ways, i.e. outside the context and the confines of the classroom. Education Manitoba cites some of these themes as poverty alleviation, human rights, health and environmental protection¹. One effort at a more informal approach to education in the context of a public school is HASTA (Hopeful Aware Students Taking Action) -- a student-led, teacher supported human rights and environmental group at École secondaire Kelvin High School. It was started in 1998 by a group of students as a chapter of Amnesty International but has grown to encompass a variety of activities. Inspired teachers², collaborating with many dedicated students (grades 9 – 12) work to raise awareness about human rights and the environment on a local and international level.

HASTA functions as a kind of educational collective. Over the past two decades, HASTA has:

- ▶ written letters for Amnesty International and led letter-writing workshops throughout the school and in other schools;
- ▶ organized school-wide Human Rights and Environmental Days for over 1450 students and staff;
- ▶ planted a community garden for Winnipeg Harvest to provide food for Winnipeg's hungry;
- ▶ organized and implemented school-wide
 - ✓ composting
 - ✓ recycling;
- ▶ distributed \$5000 annually to different charities through Winnipeg Foundation's "Youth in Philanthropy" program;
- ▶ organized Kelvin's "Commuter Challenge", polling the Kelvin community on its commuter habits and encouraging green commuting;

- ▶ promoted awareness of mental illness through posters, presentations and a feature film-documentary festival
- ▶ fundraised for emergency relief (e.g. earthquake, hurricane, war survivors);
- ▶ raised awareness and funds to address human rights abuses in North Korea
- ▶ campaigned successfully for the Winnipeg School Division
 - ✓ to use recycled paper;
 - ✓ to implement a division-wide recycling program (amongst other activities)
 - ✓ to install reusable water bottle filling stations in high schools

In reviewing and reflecting upon Kozak & Elliott "Connecting the Dots" document³ and its seven strategies for education, citizenship and sustainability, I am able to recognize several that have evolved within HASTA over the years, and that have been responsible for some of its success -- if one defines success as helping students develop and maintain a sense of the roles and their power to effect positive change within society locally and beyond.

The first that comes to mind, among the strategies listed as key⁴ would be **real-world connections**. HASTA's best projects have been those which involve authentic contact with outside authorities: inviting school trustees and superintendents to meetings; making presentations to them; contacting decision makers by phone or by letter; collaborating with like-minded activist organizations. It is the latter (i.e. working with Refugee Counsellors at IRCOM, Mines Action Canada Youth Ambassadors, Craig Kielberger and We Day facilitators, Engineers Without Borders, Liberty In North Korea Nomads, etc.) that seems to have impacted students the most, in terms of on-going activist commitments.

A second characteristic cited that resonates, when thinking of HASTA's experience, is **acting on learning**. Typically, weekly meetings with students end with a task list which usually involves

students following up on pledges to make contact with outside resources (personal or informational) and to bring back the results. Following this step, the group discusses how they wish to package and promote the knowledge gained. For example, in our recent campaign to promote awareness of human rights abuses in North Korea, two HASTA members undertook to contact Liberty in North Korea, a California based non-profit that works with North Korean refugees. This resulted in a visit from three guest speakers who made presentations along with HASTA members to over 220 students and staff during class time. Meanwhile, other HASTA members, for whom the whole North Korean situation was brand new, gathered and shared video documentaries and on-line information shared at subsequent meetings and reformulated as “Did you know” posters placed in strategic spots around the school (for example, in bathroom stalls), and organized sales of snacks to raise money for Liberty in North Korea. These final activities, incidentally, would appear to reflect the strategy of “Sharing Responsibility for Learning with Students” -- which has been a challenge for this HASTA teacher in particular (more on that, below)!

Thirdly, HASTA has worked hard to **incorporate and accommodate alternative perspectives** not only within each issue they tackle, but in choosing the issues to be tackled. The HASTA school year tends to begin with a large number of interested participants (30-40) packed into a classroom at noon hour, all eager to have their cause added to the agenda. After discussions in small groups and creative efforts at sharing highlights from these small-group conversations with the larger group, a long list of potential topics to be addressed is formulated and revised (i.e. by combining similar topics). Then, each student is “endowed” with a given number of votes -- for example, 5 stars, each of which or all of which may be assigned to the topic or topics of his-her choosing. This method, pioneered by Laura Sims, has become known as the *Sims Equation*, at HASTA. The result is a top ten (more or less, depending on the group and the year) list of issues about which the group wishes to become more informed and on which it wishes to take action. A challenge for HASTA has been how to maintain the interest and elicit action from that initial group of 30-40 students throughout the year, even during those times when the issue(s) that first inspired them to attend a HASTA meeting is not the one that is being addressed at a given time of the school year.

A final challenge which could benefit from discussion among interested participants: *how to resist the temptation to provide a forum and resources for “discussion” and “information gathering” (or*

teacher dissemination of information) to the point that students simply attend HASTA meetings with the same passivity and expectation of being “fed” that occurs in a regular class or course? Many times, issues are broached on which the majority of HASTA members appear to have little or no background knowledge. At such times, my teacher instincts (the worst ones?) take over and I rush to fill the void with facts and provocative materials to demonstrate the importance of a given topic and the moral imperatives the topic suggests. And I find, after a meeting or two (or three!) spent “becoming informed” about an issue, students appear no closer to being willing or able to take action. It almost appears that, armed with the burdensome knowledge of a complex and overwhelming situation, students lose the ability to “dial down” the issue to something that could be addressed locally.

Another topic for long discussions: how to explain and address the extreme gender imbalance (i.e. preponderance of female participation) not only in HASTA, but in similar social justice and social service oriented groups in Kelvin and in other senior high school settings?

In spite of these challenges, HASTA continues to be an inspiration to me as an Educator, because of the way it appears to inspire the 15 - 25 “hard-core” 14-18 year olds who become involved each year. It is by far one of the most genuinely ‘educational’ activities in which I am privileged to take part, if I may use Herbert Spencer’s observation (with apologies for my inserted amendment, in parentheses) : “The great aim of education is not knowledge, but (informed, enlightened) action.”

References

¹ Manitoba Education. “Education for Sustainable Development”, 2014, <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/esd/>

² who have included my colleagues **Laura Sims** and **Jennifer Kirkwood** among others over the years

³ Stan Kozak and Susan Elliott, “Connecting the Dots”, Learning for a Sustainable Future, 2011, http://www.lsf-lst.ca/media/LSF_Connecting_the_DOTS_ExecutiveSummary.pdf

⁴ which Kozak and Elliott identify as: ***Learning Locally, Integrated Learning, Acting on Learning, Real-World Connections, Considering Alternative Perspectives, Inquiry and Sharing Responsibility for Learning with Students***