Sociology of Empowerment

Let no one be discouraged by the belief there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills—against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence....Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.

It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man [or woman] stands up for an ideal, or strikes out against injustice, or acts to improve the lot of others, he [she] sends a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Robert Kennedy

Nothing could be worse than fear that one has given up too soon and left one effort unexpended which might have saved the world.

Jane Addams

I believe that at every level of society - familial, tribal, national and international - the key to a happier and more successful world is the growth of compassion. We do not need to become religious, nor do we need to believe in an ideology. All that is necessary is for each of us to develop our good human qualities.

The Dalai Lama

If they can get you to ask the wrong questions, they don’t have to worry about the answers.

Thomas Pynchon

Many people fear nothing more terribly than to take a position which stands out sharply and clearly from prevailing opinion. The tendency of most is to adopt a view that is so ambiguous that it will include everything and so popular that it will include everybody. Not a few men [sic] who cherish lofty and noble ideals hide them under a bushel for fear of being called different.
Course overview

People enjoy feeling that they have good effects on themselves, on other people, on their surroundings, and on society. Yet feelings of helplessness and insignificance are so common as to lead many people to think of them as a substantial part of the human condition. History is done by other people, they are convinced, and they experience themselves as largely passive, bewildered objects of the wills and actions of institutions and the small number of powerful people who appear to run them.

Some people would call this issue “power.” In some ways it is, in some ways it is not. Power is a word loaded with sinister implications as well as emancipatory ones. Followed by “over,” power implies domination, exploitation, inhibition, humiliation, defeat. Followed by “with,” power implies endeavors pursued and completed at no harm, no cost in dignity, self-esteem, and possibilities for fulfillment, of anyone. It implies mutual respect and pleasure in working with and for others. Further, “power with” transcends the isolation and sadness of the fully “individual” condition as well as feelings of alienation and experiences of victimization in hierarchies.

Liberal education appears to address this crucial issue. The word liberal comes from a root meaning to free, to liberate; liberal education is to free one from ignorance and confusion. But freed for what? Education can concentrate on understanding apart from action rather than the two in combination. There is nothing malevolent in this state of affairs. Rather, acting to affect world, society, and self is fraught with risks, confusions, and ambivalence about leaving the seeming safety of the familiar, of passivity, cynical detachment, and feigned indifference. For some reason, much of higher education sidesteps these issues.

We will inquire into what it is to feel entitled to and capable of affecting plans and visions of the self and the outside world. Questions will arise about historical, social, and personal sources of feelings of disempowerment and empowerment. The course is designed to investigate these issues as intellectual ones; as personal, communal, and emotional ones; and as collective agentic ones.

Compassion in action

This course will use some ideas from group process, mainly listening closely and respecting each other’s needs, sensitivities, etc. This view is inspired in part by Elise Boulding, who observes that listening, really listening, is the beginning of building a world of peace. Students will be encouraged to take risks in listening and speaking and to respect their own and others’ aspirations as well as limits in terms of how far one feels like going in taking up emotional and other issues.

---Rabbi Nachman of Breslov

Each day is an entirely new creation. Take as much as you can from what each new day has to offer. Each day has its own set of thoughts, words and deeds. Live in tune.
READINGS

Reading assignments  Students are urged to monitor mass media and social media for stories and discussions of disempowerment and empowerment.

BOOKS


If I am only one, but still I am one, I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do.

---Edward Everett Hale

Schedule of Readings

Assignments are listed at the first class day of the week; they are for the entire week.

Week 1,   Th 8/30   Explanation of the course. Process for applying and acceptance will be explained. No reading for this week.

Week 2   T 9/4    Interviews for course.

      Th 9/6    First real day of class.
Week 3  T 9/11    hooks, Introduction and chs. 1-4
Th 9/13    Rosenberg, Foreword and chs. 1-5

Week 4  T 9/18    no class
Th 9/20    no class

Sunday 9/23, half day retreat, place TBA

Week 5  T 9/25    Rosenberg, chs. 6-9
Th 9/27    meeting at Rose Art Museum with Prof. Cindy Cohen and Farhat Agbaria, coexistence facilitator from Givat Haviva and Seeds of Peace

Week 6  T 10/2    Rosenberg, chs. 10-13

Week 7  T 10/9    no class
Th 10/11  Berger, et al, section II, chs. 4-6

Week 8  T 10/16  Berger, et al, section II, chs. 7-9
Th 10/18    Nhat Hanh, entire

Week 9  M 10/23  Macy and Brown, chs. 1-5     (Brandeis Thursday)
T 10/25    Macy and Brown, chs. 6, 7, 9-11

10/19-10/21  Friday afternoon through Sunday afternoon, weekend retreat

Week 10  T 10/30    Real, Prologue-p.86
Th 11/1    “ , pp. 87-160

Week 11  T 11/6    “ , pp. 161-262
Th 11/8    “ , pp.263-340

Week 12  T 11/13  Fellman. If you have already read this for another course, please review it for further problems and insights. (The film analyses are illustrative; ignore them if they do nothing for you.). Foreword and Parts I-III.
F 11/15    Fellman, Parts IV and V (skim chs.14-17).

Week 13  T 11/20    TBA
Th 11/22    Thanksgiving

Week 14  T 11/27    TBA
This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish, little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die; for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no "brief candle" to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

George Bernard Shaw

Journal

A central part of the course is a journal of reactions—with several entries each week—to readings, class meetings, and associated events, ideas, issues on campus and in the larger society, national events, whatever, that come to mind. Please send each week’s journal to me by Tuesday as an attachment. I will reply on your text and send it back. Back up everything you write; save frequently. If you include material in your journal that is for your eyes only, delete it on the copy you hand in. We will talk about a possible pairing off of students to read each other’s journals and comment on them.

LATTE

We have a LATTE forum, and I urge any of us who wish to, to post any comments, insights, criticisms, etc., etc., etc. there for us all to see. This is a way of having a side discussion going on outside our class meetings.

Participation in an activist project

Each student (this can also be done in groups of 2 or more or the class can choose to do something as a whole) is asked to take part in some activist social change project on campus or off. We will examine our empowerment issues from time to time, in these contexts, and also those of the groups involved.
**Final work**

The final paper, to be about 15-25 pages, is meant to challenge you to integrate the various parts of the course and your reactions to them and to offer a critique of the course that can be helpful in redesigning it for the next time it is taught.

**Grading**

It seems inappropriate to grade any course, especially this one. Yet I have to do so (consider the empowerment issues here: yours, mine, ours, the administration's, that of higher education in the US, etc.). I am urging as full involvement in the course as you can muster, with as serious attention to reservations, hesitations, etc. as to the aha!s of insights, provocative associations, etc. that you discover as you go along. As always, your reactions and reflections on these matters are welcome and will be taken into the instructor’s rethinking issues. Here is what I am inclined, as of this writing, to pay special attention to:

证据 of conscientious, serious engagement in all aspects of the class—readings, concepts, exercises, and more—even unto stretching yourself and taking risks with the course materials. The premium is on grappling with the whole array of what we are doing and coming to your own insights about the course, its issues, its implications, its relation to yourself, your feelings of empowerment and disempowerment in close relationships, community, larger society, cosmos, etc.

---the Buddha

| Take time every day to sit quietly and listen. Just as driving on the right side of the road gives us the freedom to go anywhere, so accepting the natural law of constant change is our route to freedom. |
| ---the Buddha |

| You may never know the result that comes from your actions, but if you do nothing, there will be no result. |
| --Mahatma Gandhi |

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see the
instructor immediately.