

education

HealthClass2.0

Breaking Barriers through Campus-Based Civic Engagement

Natalia Mehlman Petrzela

One crisp spring evening in 2011, it was business as usual in New York City's Union Square neighborhood. Known as a "wellness mecca," the square is dotted with the telltale yoga studios, juice bars and advertisements of gluten-free/organic goods that mark a population as affluent and health-conscious. In the farmer's market, among the moms in stretchy pants and a smattering of political protesters, a group of Latino and African-American teenagers strode past stalls spilling forth with artisanal breads and bunches of kale. Talking and laughing, they disappeared into McDonald's, one of the neighborhood's vanishing fast-food eateries.

The kids almost certainly attended a public high school one block east that can stand out in this tony neighborhood as much as the Golden Arches. Washington Irving High School occupies an entire city block, and like many "comprehensive high schools" constructed in the early 20th century, it is the architectural manifestation of an educational theory that championed large, bureaucratic institutions as the best way to serve a growing immigrant and urban population. Today, reflecting a more recent educational trend, the rambling structure is called an "educational complex." It houses six "small schools" that

serve distinct student bodies with specialized curricula ranging from the performing arts to English language learning. What the schools share is a high rate of nonwhite students eligible for free-and-reduced lunch; in New York City's socioeconomic calculus, these designations signify economic privation.¹

One block in the opposite direction stands The New School, a private, four-year university where I was at the time co-chair of Education Studies. New School students enjoy a rich liberal arts curriculum bolstered by the campus incarnations of wellness culture at-large: nutrition counseling, meditation sessions, and a growing intellectual focus on issues of spirituality, food and the body, not to mention how inequality informs them. Washington Irving students were only slightly more likely to attend a college like ours than the patrons browsing the Greenmarket were to drop their stalks of Swiss chard for a Big Mac. Abundant research suggests that wellness, as much as test scores, skin color, income and educational attainment, is becoming another marker of social inequality.²

As an expert in education passionate about wellness, I wondered what I could do. I wanted to see whether there was a way that Union Square, which stood physically and culturally between the worlds of the New School and Washington Irving, could unite rather than divide. I wanted to know if we could avoid the damaging *noblesse oblige* cast of so many social reform efforts, especially those that originate in privileged spaces, and address the intimate realms of food and health. I wondered if it was possible to collaborate with under-resourced schools to launch a wellness education program that conveyed the best of the contemporary

healthy-living movement, but also excited the enthusiasm and inspired the participation of more diverse communities.

Within weeks, food justice activist Ellen Gustafson and I had co-founded Health-Class2.0 (HC2.0), an experiential wellness education partnership between The New School and Washington Irving Educational Complex. Four years later, HC2.0 has served close to 5,000 youth in Manhattan and the Bronx through the work of about 40 college mentors and the donations of 20 food partners. The rewards and challenges of co-founding and directing HC2.0 have been enormous, and shed light on the complex dynamics of establishing innovative, campus-based civic engagement initiatives that bridge culture and class.

The Politics of Wellness

Existing wellness education programs have gained strength from an intensified focus on a “public health crisis” by fora from the popular press to the Executive Office. First Lady Michelle Obama’s splashiest initiatives include planting an organic vegetable garden at the White House and piloting “Let’s Move,” which provides incentives for local schools and communities to promote physical fitness among children. These programs attain their energy and urgency from new attention to the prevalence of obesity and diabetes in low-income environments, both of which have skyrocketed since the 1980s despite modest improvement in the last several years.³

Critics of these reforms highlight the problem of stigmatizing poor communities by

defining them as diseased, and of fostering fat hatred by vilifying corpulent bodies rather than interrogating the social systems that create nutrition-related health issues. Quantification also comes under fire — counting pounds lost or changes in Body Mass Index (BMI) — in that fixating on these easily measurable metrics can distract from bigger structural and social-emotional issues. Since such programs are relatively recent and often small-scale, assessments of effectiveness are few; every account of a program such as the popular Energy Up, which reports having coached many students to substantial weight loss, is countered by an image of a Dumpster overflowing with healthy school lunches discarded by students who would rather go hungry than eat spinach pasta and vegetarian meatballs.⁴

Wellness culture at large both bolsters and limits such school-based efforts. Mass-market retailers including Walmart and even McDonald’s popularize healthy living by stocking organic products and offering less caloric alternatives to Big Macs and super-size fries, but “wellness” is often understood as a premium consumer product rather than as a human right. In 2009, the *New York Times* noted that affluent Manhattanites spend freely on “self-actualization” and wellness, which have become status symbols akin to the designer stilettos of the 1990s. Parodies featuring homeless people sweating through a spinning class or fictional vegan “thugs” go viral, evidence that imagining the poor or minorities engaging in quintessential wellness activities is sufficiently unlikely as to verge on absurd.⁵ Reality TV star “Mama June,” matriarch of a white, working-class family, affirmed as much when she commented on her

recent weight loss, which she insisted was not deliberate or due to healthier eating. Her family, she declared, would never eat “fancy” foods such as quinoa or kale regardless of their improved economic station; she would stick with “sketti,” a concoction of spaghetti, Country Crock spread and ketchup. Here, eschewing nutritious food serves as badge of working-class authenticity, a dynamic that can only be understood as the result of cultural assumptions that define wellness as decidedly upper-crust.⁶

Mission

Ellen and I were entering fraught territory, no question. Yet given our peculiar blend of expertise and passions, we perceived an opportunity that soon felt like a mandate. Despite the widespread knowledge that poverty and poor health are intertwined, we could not identify a wellness education program that raised awareness of structural inequality in concert with personal wellbeing. Despite the public outcry about sedentary, poorly nourished youth, few programs connected exercise and food education as a unitary whole. Despite the demonstrated success of progressive education, many health classes were dry and prescriptive, never creating the sensory opportunities to taste healthy food or feel the exhilaration of a workout, absences exacerbated by longstanding, lackluster associations with cafeteria food and physical education curricula. And in spite of the excitement in educational circles about “integrated curricula,” knowledge about food, fitness and wellbeing was entirely disconnected from academic subjects, effectively teaching that

body and mind are similarly divorced, an idea that has lost favor in most other reaches of U.S. culture.

HealthClass2.0’s founding mission envisions transforming this context, based on three principles:

- 1) Educating young people to be healthy, confident and socially engaged human beings should be core to any serious educational mission.
- 2) Encouraging kids to create healthy habits and fostering understanding of the structural factors that contribute to health and food insecurity issues are equally important and intertwined.
- 3) A holistic approach to fitness and food education is a pedagogically exciting way to develop critical thinking and a strong sense of self among both our school-age students and college leaders.

Practice

HC2.0 collaborates on a unique strategy with each site to ensure these goals are met. In every session, youth EXERCISE, EAT, and ENGAGE. Each day in our 10-week curriculum centers on a particular theme that encompasses more than food and fitness, e.g., “Trying Something New” or “Making Choices.” The class begins with a conversation about what this theme means to them — for example, identifying the last time they broke their routine or made a deliberate, independent choice. Next, the students participate in an “intenSati” workout, an exercise program that builds on psychological and neuroscience



Figure 1. Bronx middle school students who participate in HC2.0 after school begin the EXERCISE portion with the meditative “intenSati warmup,” declaring: “Every day, in a very true way, I co-create my reality.”

research that identifies the social-emotional benefits of “positive self-talk” and vigorous exercise. Each movement is paired with vocal affirmations related to the daily theme, e.g., “I make a choice! I use my voice!”⁷

On a more basic level, given many kids’ disenchantment with physical education classes, HC2.0 introduces the idea that exercise can foster community and fun. We have worked with teachers to eliminate exercise as a punitive measure, as in disciplining misbehavior with pushups or laps. After students work up a sweat and reflect on how they feel, leaders distribute a healthy snack from one of our food donors and discuss the food — taste, nutritional value, origins, availability — as the class partakes. We then connect the discussion to the daily theme; if we distribute air-popped chips to teach about making choices, for example, we talk about the ben-

efit of air-popping over frying and also why this particular healthier option is available at a price similar to more heavily processed alternatives. Finally, students receive small, manageable tasks that enable them to engage with these ideas beyond the brief periods we have together — usually a 40-minute class or afterschool session. Increasingly, we keep in touch later through social media. “Hey, kids in the Bronx are doing the same thing as us!” exclaimed one girl who follows our Instagram account; “Check out my healthy homemade apple juice!” read a caption of another student’s post to our Facebook wall.

Back in Fall 2012, the first HealthClass2.0 session took place at Washington Irving High School with a group of about 40 girls — fewer than half of those enrolled in that class period. Ellen and I conducted the entire season together, serving fresh food and

juices donated by our first food partner, Blue-PrintJuice. Today, we rarely attend sessions beyond kickoff. Instead, the sessions are led by teams of New School students, who earn a stipend and course credit. College students studying majors from dance to psychology to design meet in a weekly “practicum” co-facilitated by our “Leader Trainer,” who is a fitness professional, and myself. Here, students learn to facilitate sessions and support each other in facing the successes and inevitable challenges that arise, ranging from navigating the school buildings to contemplating how their identities affect their intervention efforts. Although not required, students are strongly encouraged to enroll in my course, “Body, Mind, and School: American Well-

ness Education, Past and Present,” a historical and contemporary exploration of relevant themes such as the fraught dynamics of university-community partnerships, the racial achievement gap, the history of the teaching profession and the emergence and commodification of the wellness concept. Unlike other nonprofit initiatives that depend on volunteers with full-time jobs, HC2.0’s reliance on college students allows our leaders to constantly revisit the deeper intellectual questions that arise during their work as opposed to merely troubleshooting practical issues. We have had the opportunity, for example, to ponder how we could do better than the early 20th-century reformers who attempted to impose their culinary and hy-



Figure 2. New School college leader Kayla Yoder leads high-school students on the lesson dedicated to “Self-Love.”

gienic practices on Mexican immigrants with very different customs.⁸ With a century of hindsight, their actions were clearly coercive and shaped by racial bias, though their motivations ring familiar with our students: they believed they had important, urgent knowledge to share about health and wellbeing.

Challenges

The quotidian challenges of operating a program for 1,000 children at six school sites, led by 20 college student leaders and supported by (often perishable) donations from a dozen donors per semester can be dizzying. The obstacles that keep me up at night, however, are big-picture. Primary are the persistent issues of privilege that shape most such university-based projects. Ethnographer Julie Guthmann has pointed to the flawed assumption held by many wellness reformers that “if [the poor] only knew” about the benefits of organic food, local farming, etc., they would cheerfully adopt new habits. On the contrary, she finds, this is the thinking of myopic reformers whose sense of cultural superiority silences the voices of the communities they problematically purport to “save” or “enlighten.” A California project targeting a majority-Latino school in a gardening initiative furnishes a vivid example: well intentioned if oblivious reformers understandably horrified immigrant parents who perceived school as an avenue *out* of the agricultural labor that restricted their own aspirations.⁹

To avoid this end, both in my academic course and in the practicum we discuss social theory and ethnography in specific reference to the students’ identities and school-

based experiences. As well, we avoid the damaging convention of labeling certain behaviors or foods “bad” or “good,” which can counterproductively vilify children’s families. Instead we emphasize harm reduction, celebrating progress as incremental. In one example, a sixth-grader convinced her mother to buy “Pop-Tarts without the frosting and sprinkles,” for the first time advocating for a reform in her household food system. Sensitive to the critiques raised by Fat Activists, we also avoid the term “obesity epidemic” which dominates so much of the discourse. Openly discussing issues of privilege, identity and cultural capital are opportunities few volunteers in other programs have. This approach can backfire; one leader left the program because she felt paralyzed by her heightened awareness of her own racial and economic privilege. Overwhelmingly, however, students are receptive and insightful and lead with greater cultural insight and sensitivity.

Second, the fact that HC2.0 solicits corporate donations can feel practically transgressive on a liberal arts campus that rarely grapples with this dynamic and its attendant ethical questions. I clearly define for our students and donors the fine but crucial line between “partnership” and “sponsorship.” The products we receive are employed as strictly as possible as teaching, not marketing, tools. Our leaders do not mention brand names (e.g., “a nut bar” rather than a “KIND bar”), and focus on content rather than on brand identity. Packaging too serves a pedagogical end, inspiring conversations about the difference between federally regulated nutritional information and the empty “health claims” adorning many wrappers. Students, of course, still see the brand names, but given the alter-



Figure 3. Middle and high school students enjoying donated bottled water after a lesson on “Keeping it Simple” that focuses on hydration. A persistent challenge is finding donors of reusable water bottles, since we address the environmental impact of plastic.

native is forgoing HC2.0’s “experiential food” offerings, the tradeoff seems reasonable.

To food partners, I explain that while children are not to be considered a “market segment,” the publics we reach through social media and fundraising events *are*, and we promote donor brands via these channels accordingly. College leaders find our relationship with food partners both fascinating and off-putting; much of their intellectual formation is grounded in critical theory that is broadly suspicious of “market forces.” Some of our best conversations have been about how to balance pragmatism and idealism in navigating this particularly knotty issue. Each semester, I introduce the possibility

of applying for partnership with large companies such as Pepsi, given their enormous budgets. “Now *that* is too far,” one student claimed in discussion, quickly affirmed by his classmates’ murmurs. Yet none could articulate why courting many small providers rather than a couple of large donors — which would free up time and resources to devote to direct service — represented a moral high ground. We struggle with this together.

Finally, the question of assessment is persistent, as it should be. Unlike programs focused narrowly on eating or exercise, HC2.0 perceives BMI and weight loss as inappropriate yardsticks, given our broader programmatic aims to raise self-awareness and self-esteem

Still, the question of whether or not “it works” is fair. So far, together with a researcher at Borough of Manhattan Community College, we have amassed substantial qualitative evidence that students perceive HC2.0 as improving their lives. “I run twice a week with my dad,” one 7th grader reported, leading them to spend more time together and to his shedding 20 pounds. A high school senior shyly approached me and confided that she and her sisters repeat our affirmation — “Every day in a very true way, I co-create my reality” — each morning before boarding a series of three separate subway lines. With the assistance of a classmate with better English, a 10th grader reported that when he told his family, recently arrived from Yemen, that the Greenmarket accepted EBT, he was charged with purchasing the family’s vegetables each Monday. Such unquantifiable stories abound, narratives describing improved physical health as well as greater self-confidence, independence and responsibility. Every school has invited us back and we consistently attract new leaders and institutions, testaments to our positive influence on school communities.

Unintended Consequences

Arriving at surprising conclusions is among the most satisfying parts of research, and HC2.0 has yielded exciting, unintended consequences far beyond our initial vision. Though college leaders learn that entering a school means participating rather than parachuting into a community, none of us anticipated how significant these school-based experiences would be. “I noticed how the

halls were freshly painted and covered with student work at one school and literally one floor down there is no toilet paper and the water fountains were broken,” one college student who had been homeschooled commented. The reality of the obstacles wellness advocates face crystallized when another student shared an elevator with a cafeteria-bound delivery cart piled high with packaged, processed foods. “I decided I could despair and leave,” she explained, “or acknowledge this reality and do the best I can.” At least six HC2.0 alumni/ae are pursuing careers in youth development, a path partly inspired by these forays, often their first, into the public schools. Like many of my academic colleagues, I assume most undergraduate commitments will span one semester. By contrast, virtually all HC2.0 leaders stay on for two or more semesters, and five alums remain active leaders, carving time from jobs and graduate study to support current students in leading sessions.

In our early discussions, Ellen and I wondered if our college leaders were capable of “standing in” for us as facilitators, if they could master HC2.0 with its many moving parts. Not only have they proven able, but their age enables them to connect in a way we, nearly two decades out of high school, struggle to achieve. What our leaders lack in polish they make up for in authenticity and accessibility. “Tell me about college. It’s really right across Union Square?” is a common question posed to leaders after class, and often with surprising assertiveness, suggesting that HC2.0 helps kids tap into their capacity to imagine success. Moreover, reflecting The New School’s high percentage of Pell Grant recipients, our leaders have often

overcome their own socioeconomic barriers to attend college, stories I have seen several leaders share with high-school students who look amazed, and then comforted, that these private-college kids are not such an alien breed after all.

Finally, the way our presence has reverberated at school sites has surprised us. For example, our first point of contact at Washington Irving was the director of its School Based Health Center, who advocated for implementing HC2.0 with individual principals. Later, once we were conducting programming at four schools, she confided that HC2.0's presence had eased tensions between the Center and certain administrators who had been wary of what they perceived as

its singular focus on the loaded issue of sexual health. Once the Center became aligned with the less politically volatile mission of HC2.0, she recounted excitedly, administrators relaxed and readily referred students to the Center, including for the sexual health counseling that had once raised suspicion.

Breaking Boundaries

Four years since the epiphany in the Greenmarket, HC2.0 is best understood as a project in breaking down boundaries of class, culture and convention, obstacles that can feel especially insurmountable in higher education contexts. Straddling the chasm



Figure 4. New School college leaders, wearing donated tee-shirts, practice their moves before leading HealthClass2.0 sessions.

between the worlds of the academy and the public schools can feel like a radical, even career-jeopardizing act on some campuses. A program focused on “soft” socio-emotional skills, rather than literacy or STEM, for example, can expose one to dreaded charges of anti-intellectualism. A colleague at a Research1 institution snorted when I explained HC2.0: “Good luck getting tenure with that!” he exclaimed. HC2.0 also continually demands reaching across internal institutional divides, both to develop pedagogical content and to improve organizational structure. At HC2.0, such initially tentative entreaties across divisions and disciplines have resulted in a yearlong collaboration with design students and faculty on an arts-based sex education module. We have also won a \$20,000 external grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, thanks to support from colleagues in nonprofit management and social innovation, to name only two examples. Stepping into the realm of corporate fundraising is *terra incognita* for a historian, but also makes possible the unique experiences of educating with food and navigating the pragmatic and ethical concerns attendant to running a cause-driven organization. In all realms, HC2.0 endeavors to challenge dichotomies of school and college, of body and mind, of private and public.

Overused as the phrase “bridging theory and practice” has become, every dimension of HC2.0 operates to encourage K–12 and college students alike to reconcile big ideas about self and society with their daily actions. Effectively, *this* is the lesson HC2.0 endeavors to instill: understand the structures and circumstances that shape one’s life and muster the courage and the creativity to tran-

scend and transform them in service of building a better life and world.

Notes

Photos by Olivia Zimmerman.

1. Data from www.insideschools.org. In 2013, Success Charter Network opened an elementary school in the complex which serves a relatively higher SES group: 25% receive free/reduced lunch as opposed to nearly 80% on average for the high schools.

2. Center for Disease Control, “Health, United States, 2011, With Special Feature on Socioeconomic Status and Health,” 2012.

3. These improvements have been at the local level. Center for Disease Control, “Progress on Childhood Obesity: Many States Show Declines,” August 2013. New York City is one of these cities: “Reversing the Epidemic: The New York City Obesity Task Force Plan to Prevent and Control Obesity,” May 31, 2012.

4. “LAUSD Students Roundly Reject Healthier School Lunch Menu,” CBS News, January 19, 2012.

5. Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, “On Wellness and Class in America (And Why Thug Kitchen and that Soul-Cycle-for-the-Homeless Guy Are—Not?—So Funny,” *Huffington Post*, July 16, 2013.

6. As many have commented about the *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* phenomenon, there is a dimension of performativity to the starring family, who play into dominant stereotypes about the grotesqueness of the poor. Specifically on “sketti,” see Brianna Rognlin, “Honey Boo Boo’s Sketti is Gross. Exploiting it for Entertainment is Grosser,” *Blisstree.Com*, September 13, 2012.

7. See, among other positive psychologists, Martin E. Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (New York: Vintage, 2006); Jennifer S. Cheavens, David B. Feld-

man, Julia T. Woodward, C.R. Snyder, "Hope in Cognitive Psychotherapies: Working with Client Strengths," *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy* 20, no. 2 (2006): 135–145(11)

8. George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

9. Julie Guthmann, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Alternative Food," 2008. http://www.havenscenter.org/audio/julie_guthman_incredible_whiteness_alternative_food

Suggestions for Further Reading/Viewing

Dewey, John. *The Child and the Curriculum*. New York: Martino Fine Books (1902), 2011.

Green, Harvey. *Fit for America: Health, Fitness, Sport, and American Society*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.

Gustafson, Ellen. *We the Eaters: If We Can Change Dinner, We Can Change the World*. New York: Rodale, 2014.

Guthman, Julie. *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011.

Harkavy, Ira and Bill M. Donovan, eds. *Connecting Past and Present: Concepts and Models for Service Learning in the Disciplines- History*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2000.

Lasch-Quinn, Elisabeth. *Race Experts: How Racial Etiquette, Sensitivity Training, and New Age Therapy Hijacked the Civil Rights Revolution*. New York: Norton, 2001.

Metzl, Jonathan. *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.

Moskowitz, Eva. *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Nelson, Alondra. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Natalia Mehlman Petrzela is assistant professor of History at The New School. Her first book, *Classroom Wars: Language, Sex, and the Making of Modern Political Culture* (Oxford, 2015), explores the roots of the culture wars in American public schools, specifically amid heated battles over sexuality and bilingual education. Current research traces the rise of "wellness culture" since the 1950s, asking how and why Americans have increasingly linked food and fitness regimes to the pursuit of self-fulfillment. These scholarly pursuits are linked to her activism as co-founder of Health-Class2.0, an experiential health education program that bridges a wellness gap in public school education and connects university mentors with K-12 students. Information is available at www.healthclass.org. Beyond the academy, she teaches a mind-body practice called *intenSati* in NYC. Her writing has appeared in publications including *The New York Times*, *Slate* and *The Huffington Post* and she writes a regular column on wellness history in the national online magazine *Well+Good*. She holds a BA from Columbia College and a MA and Ph.D. from Stanford University, all in History. Learn more at <http://www.nataliapetrzela.com>.