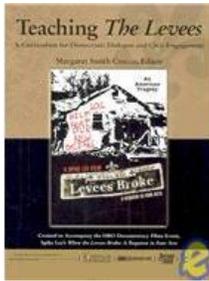

Professional Book Review

Crocco, M. (Ed.). (2007). *Teaching the Levees: A Curriculum for Democratic Dialogue and Civic Engagement*. New York: Teachers College Press. 104 pp., ISBN: 978-0807751008 (pbk). \$13.95.

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Teaching the Levees: A Curriculum for Democratic and Civic Engagement is a curriculum project that is to be used in conjunction with Spike Lee's 2006 HBO documentary, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*. Developed by the faculty, staff, and students of Teachers College of Columbia University with funding from The Rockefeller Foundation, this collaborative venture provides multiple opportunities to explore critically the sociocultural, sociopolitical, sociohistorical, socioeconomic, and bureaucratic issues raised in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. This powerful and engaging teaching tool can be used to spark dialogue and collective action in high schools, universities, community centers, libraries, government institutions, and social justice organizations surrounding topics such as structural racism and classism, democracy, citizenship, government, economics, and the intersections of race, class, and gender. This curriculum project includes detailed timelines immediately before and after Katrina, as well as the political and historical context surrounding the years before and after the tragedy. In addition, the detailed Viewing Guide with provocative and critical questions, thought-provoking essays, handouts, resources, a website (teachingthelevees.org), and engaging curricular lessons can be used in part or as a whole to investigate the multilayered issues surrounding this American tragedy.

With the underlying goals of this project located in the authors' desire to stimulate democratic dialogue, civic engagement, and the understanding of surrounding controversial and often-evaded topics related to Katrina, it is important to examine how they structured the book to facilitate the realization of these goals. The curriculum goals, explicitly laid out on page one, include understanding the multifaceted "governmental, communal, and personal responsibility implicated in situations of disaster;" developing empathy with the victims of Katrina; developing skills related to engaging in democratic dialogue about race, class, and other controversial topics; and using new knowledge and information to take individual and collective community action. The next section includes a detailed and historical timeline of the events prior to and after Katrina. Next, the Viewing Guide, which can be used while watching the documentary, provides low-level factual questions that can be used to process the overwhelming information in the documentary, as well as higher-order, critical thinking questions that invite the viewer to evaluate, deliberate, synthesize, critique, question, and react to the information

presented in the film. Understanding that the topics and questions may evoke emotional and contrary perspectives, the authors have provided guidelines for engaging in democratic dialogues, as well as determining how the film should be used and by whom.

The curricular units are divided into five topic areas that are aligned with specific sections of the film as well as the various audiences the developers had in mind. These sections include Media Literacy Unit, Adult-Oriented Unit, College-Oriented Unit, High School Civics and Economics Units, and High School Geography and History Units. The authors recognize the high reading level associated with many of these lessons, so they encourage facilitators to modify and simplify the materials and lessons to suit their audience's needs. The authors acknowledge the need for diverse perspectives, sources, and information to create truly democratic dialogue. Each unit includes a brief introduction, essential questions, key concepts, skills orientation, a link to section in the film, national standards, materials/handouts, additional reference materials and websites, complete lessons, closure activities, topics for further study, project ideas, questions, and a call to action section. Examples of handouts include race and class statistics relevant to Katrina and excerpts from newspapers, maps, and tables for collecting data and information. While the authors hope the call-to-action section will be a starting point for collective and individual action by those engaged in the curriculum, it is my opinion that this section could have been developed more, so as to further stimulate ideas and action. If the ultimate goals are related to democratic dialogue and civic engagement, the authors could have provided more suggestions, information, or specific connections to activities or organizations engaged in exposing and fighting racial and socioeconomic inequities.

In the spirit of democratic dialogue, civic engagement, and activism in one's community, I would have liked to see critical self-reflective questions, lessons, or assignments that help those involved in the curriculum acknowledge their own personal accountability, complacency, and active or passive role or responsibility following the events of August 29, 2005. While the film, lessons, and questions look to answer who is responsible in terms of government officials and agencies, the harder questions to ask now are what WE did as fellow Americans in the wake of Katrina. What conversations did we have or not have? What political, civic, or volunteer action did we take or not take as a response to the deplorable events surrounding Katrina? How did we help those whose personal stories we saw in the film and news or in our communities and schools? How does our complacency and failure to respond as fellow, democratic citizens perpetuate the inequities and injustices exposed in this film? While it is easy to point fingers at those in government who failed the citizens of New Orleans during and after the tragedy, it is important to recognize that this does not address the multifaceted problems still related to Katrina. How are we as citizens holding our elected officials responsible for rebuilding New Orleans? How are we as citizens holding the media responsible for keeping the story alive? These tough questions that locate American citizens in a context of promulgating inequities by acquiescence, silence, and inaction are a missing and vital piece to this curriculum.

Overall, I found this curriculum project to be an outstanding example of promoting social justice action integrated across subject matters and audiences. The authors provide ample resources, questions, connections, and opportunities for critical democratic discourse, civic engagement, and action surrounding the issues we sorely need to address in relation to New Orleans and the United States as a whole. The developers of this curriculum saw the need and opportunity to challenge educators, community organizations, and students in a manner that is both relevant and crucial to our nation's progress and democracy.