

Teaching and Learning to Advance The Needs of Humanity

Education is implicated in many of the world's problems today: from poverty and inequality, to the prevalence of ignorance related to the threats posed by climate change, disease, environmental degradation, to growing authoritarianism. However, education is also implicated as a potential solution to many of the problems we face.

The question we propose to explore in USC Rossier's first Master Class is "How can education be used as a resource for addressing the major challenges facing the world today, and how might teaching and learning need to be changed for this to occur?"

USC Rossier's Master Class was created to spur broad discussions that are central to the mission of the School among our students, faculty and staff. Like most academic institutions, we are siloed by our specializations. Our separations by programs and areas of academic focus, contribute to fragmentation and undermine our ability to be more impactful as a school. The Master Class has been created to counter these tendencies. This fall, the first classes will be taught by Dean Noguera and Professor Mary Helen Immordino-Yang. The subject of the first Master Class is: Teaching and Learning to Advance the Needs and Interests of Humanity.

Advancing humanity is obviously central to what we do at USC Rossier. Whether our students are future counselors, therapists, researchers, college advisors or leaders, all come to USC Rossier to engage deeply in conversations that push the edges of what we know in order to respond to new challenges emerging in the real world. As an educational institution, we are also deeply committed to ongoing capacity building and learning. Ironically, the central activity we engage in – teaching and learning-- what Richard Elmore referred to as the "technical core"—has rarely been examined collectively. What sorts of educational experiences produce learning that best advances the interests of humanity? How can our teaching facilitate the acquisition of the kind of knowledge, awareness and mindsets that are needed to address the tremendous problems we face?

Over the course of the five classes, Drs. Noguera and Immordino-Yang will explore these questions from multiple perspectives, including sociological, historical, developmental and neuroscientific. Their aim is to ignite conversation that will continue in our courses and programs. Through this activity we hope to enrich our intellectual community by reinvigorating commitment to our mission, challenging and deconstructing our assumptions, and spurring dialog that enriches our collective knowledge, understanding and capacity to change the world.

A central premise of Pedro Noguera's sessions will be that the most powerful teaching is premised upon an extended dialogue between teacher and student. Drawing on the seminal work of Brazilian educator Paulo Friere, the class will explore how teachers can use listening, dialogue, and empathy to engage students in an educational process based upon collective inquiry and learning. In many respects, this involves a departure from positioning the teacher as the "all knowing expert", to envisioning teachers as facilitators and guides who reject the idea of teaching students what to think, and embrace their role in supporting students' development of intellectual capacities and dispositions—teaching how and when to think. If education is to play a role in advancing knowledge and solving problems, the educational process must nurture interpersonal engagement and perspective-taking, curiosity, critical thinking, disciplinary knowledge, ethics and, along the way, a love of learning.

Immordino-Yang will revisit this central premise from a transdisciplinary developmental and neurobiological perspective. Deep diving into the processes of meaning-making and memory in the mind and brain, she will share data from diverse Los Angeles area students and teachers that challenge our traditional notions of the dichotomy between emotion and cognition, along the way highlighting the power of culture, social experience, and reflective thinking in human personal, intellectual and civic development and wellbeing. She will argue for a Copernican Shift that recenters education around teachers' and students' experiences of the thinking process-- what it feels like to think, rather than around standardized outcomes and the interventions that aim to impact them.

In the time we have, we will explore how we can recenter education onto supporting and enhancing learners' rich human potential—their interests and passions, cultural fonts of knowledge, lived experiences, preferences, skills and dispositions of mind. Young people are our greatest hope. How can we work together to build public education systems that support them in thinking critically about the systems and conditions that shape us, in building strong relationships across difference, and in engaging ethically and creatively in the complexity of the world in which we live; a world someday they will lead?