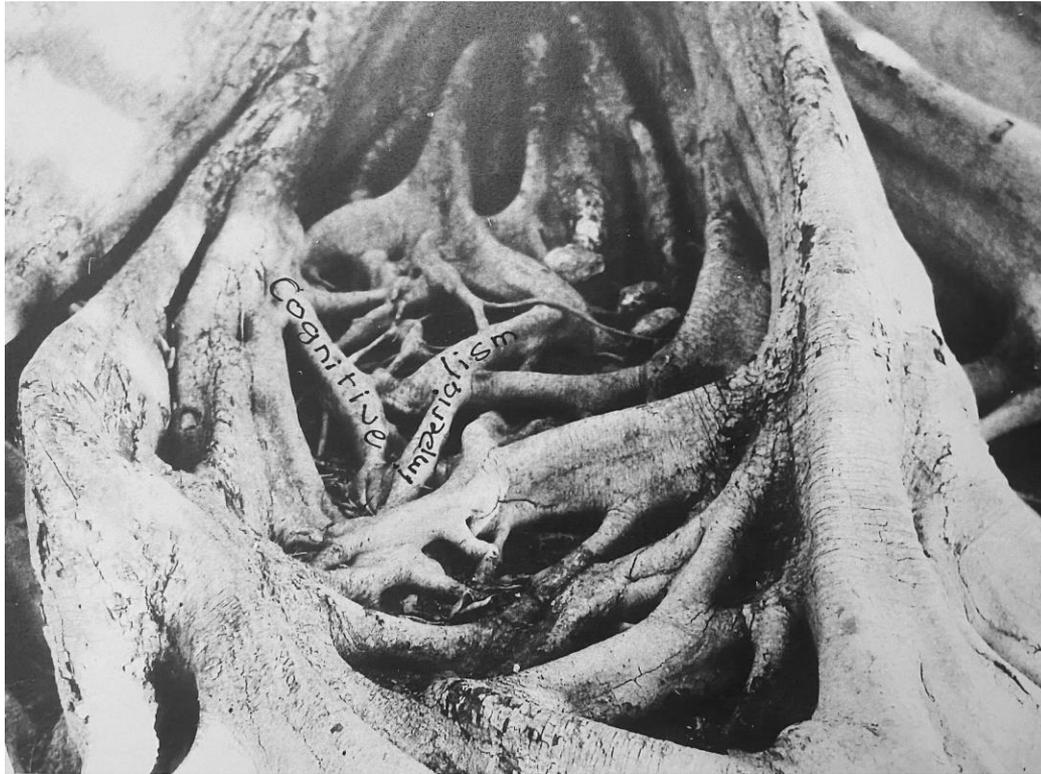


Teaching, a Moral Mission

Popular Education for Justice



Every object of nature affords a subject for profitable study, the mind is so formed; that it can contemplate these objects not only with pleasure, but with profit.

God hath created all, with the evident design, that his rational creatures; should improve every faculty; in contemplating his character, as exhibited in his works of creation.

Those who neglect the improvement of these faculties, bury the talents which God hath given and thus abuse his rich blessing.¹

- Betsey in a 1935 essay "A Good Scholar"

August, 2025

Dear Betsey -

When your family first arrived in Austinburg in 1810, there was no school. Building the church took priority.

Your father home-schooled you for a while, then you went to the first school in the home of the Austin family, right across the road from your house.

130 years later, I also only had to go out my back door and walk through our backyard to the playground of the elementary school.

The school is gone now, new trees separate our house from the site, transformed over centuries from forest to schoolyard to town park.

I lay down on the manicured lawn, straining to listen underground, to imagine your early days in the Austinburg schools, Betsey. What history is buried here?



How did you develop your teaching methods, Betsey?

What drew you to travel to New York in the early 1830s to study the [infant schools in England](#)?

A more holistic approach was definitely central to the infant schools you started, engaging children in rhyming songs to learn math, creating dangling planetary systems as mobiles to teach astronomy.

You were drawn to the progressive, child-centered, open and exploratory approach of infant schools; a multi-sensory perspective presaging the practices of Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, John Dewey, Jean Piaget.

The Welsh industrialist [Robert Owen](#) brought these ideas to America in the 1820s.

Were you also influenced by his utopian socialism and the cooperative movement?

Teachers were facilitators of this open-classroom approach, where children moved freely from indoors to outdoors, choosing their own activities, appropriate to their development level.

Very similar to my son Joshua's two years in kindergarten at Toronto's Downtown Alternative School in the late 1980s, where I created a photo story of the [Peacemaking Process](#) that the kids practiced. You would have loved this, Betsey!

Ironically, there was no kindergarten in Austinburg by the time I was ready for it in 1950.

Our only option was “Charming Children,” kindergarten by radio, broadcast from a station in the largest nearby city, Cleveland.

We were mailed a package to encourage our participation – paper, coloured pencils, some puzzles, and other small items.

Every weekday morning at 9 AM, I would tune into station CLCC, sit down on the living room carpet with my “school supplies,” joining other children on the air from other poorer outposts in the region.

The perky voices at the other end taught us simple songs, and we sang along.

Once a year we were invited to the big city studio to join our radio teachers and sing a solo on the air. The only one I remember: “Put your little foot right here. Oh, see my new shoes, my pretty new shoes.”

No environmental or social justice messages, Betsey.



I gave a keynote to art teachers in Ontario elementary schools, in 2008, offering examples of how art, equity, and ecology can be integrated into holistic hands-on activities.

I’m interested in how today’s primary schools nurture kids’ creativity and their connections with nature, with themselves as nature.

Though I have no photos from my 1950s Charming Children experience, I did photograph the grandchildren making art last summer,

inspired by water, land, trees.

Arts-based methods have also been my passion from early on. My older brother Mike, the kid scientist, used to tease me for spending so much time drawing an artistic cover for my assignments.

My exploration of experiential learning burst wide open when I was hired in 1970 to teach at an experimental community college in New Jersey, whose campus was on a former (very smelly!) horse farm. A prerequisite for the job was reading Teaching as a Subversive Activity. I had found a home..!

It was the 1970s. I met my classes in repurposed barn stalls. We sat in circles.

I taught in the Psychology Department; for a course on Human Growth and Development I created a guided visualization of the development of the fetus to birth, led blind walks among the trees to heighten multi-sensory environmental awareness.

Teachers were invited to create innovative courses for a six-week mid-winter term, so we broke cultural silences with a team-taught interdisciplinary class on Human Sexuality, warmed the cold war mentality with a study tour of the former Soviet Union, and melted art hierarchies through a Creativity: The Person and the Process workshop.



That workshop motivated me to quit teaching and spend six months learning from former students a wide range of art practices (photography, picture framing, creative movement, Chinese cooking, sand candle making, etc.) I called it the Spring of My Apprenticing.

My first venture into a darkroom led to my first photo exhibit exposing the deep questions arising from my recent three-month trip through the Middle East and Asia.

I discovered my favourite tool. From then on, the camera became my right arm.

My interest in alternative education was deepened in the 1960s and 1970s through learning by doing, acting, and reflecting—the art of activism: the Student Power movement emerged on the heels of the Civil Rights, anti-war and women’s liberation movements.

As student activists, we critiqued the hierarchical structures of universities. Decades later we dug deeper into the colonial history of western academia, and the dominance of Eurocentric ways of knowing.

The women’s movement mantra that the “personal is political” helped us claim the knowledge we carry in our bodies with a critical understanding of how structural inequities shape our bodies.



Climate Justice rally in Toronto 2019



Translating for Myles Horton and Paulo Freire in Nicaragua, 1983

Teaching in an alternative college during those heady student power years planted the seed for my doctoral research on Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, whose [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#) connected the unequal power dynamics between teacher and student in the classroom to institutional classism, racism, and sexism.

A century earlier, you used similar language, Betsey, in your contribution to the publication, [Plea of the Oppressed](#).

Still, as “pioneers” in the “new world,” did you ever consider you were bringing European notions of knowledge to the original inhabitants who had their own multi-sensory ways of knowing?

Do you and I have a common understanding, Betsey, of who was oppressed, why, and how?

For you, too, Betsey, college opened your world to the major social struggles of the time— anti-slavery, women’s rights, religious strife, and temperance.

At the time, Oberlin College was the only school of higher education that admitted women and Blacks.

As one of the first females admitted to the college, in the 1830s, you became convinced that women and blacks could profit from education, just as well as a white male.²

While you saw the women’s rights movement as integral to a broader reform movement, it was frowned upon at Oberlin at the time as “an ultra-radical activity.”



Back in Austinburg in 1834, you organized the Young Ladies Society for Intellectual Improvement, to expand the facilities of the mind and elevate the soul... while imprisoned in this frail body of clay.³

I’m curious about how you understood women’s bodies.

Your actions were anything but frail.

I imagine you bringing those young women together twice a month in your parlour to discuss current and historical issues: abolition, colonization, and temperance.

There were reasons women needed their own space; when you finally opened up the group to men, you found that they interrupted, spoke out of turn, and didn’t follow the protocol.

Did that behaviour contribute to the dissolution of the Young Ladies Society in 1835?

All this sounds so familiar...

Your gatherings, Betsey, echo women’s consciousness-raising groups of the ‘60s and ‘70s that fed the women’s movement in North America.

Meanwhile, I still monitor dinner parties to try to keep male voices from dominating...!

Your practice of informal education, gathering outside of public schools, resonates with my own life's work in popular education, building on [my PhD research in Peru](#) in 1976 on the problem-solving pedagogy of Paulo Freire, practiced in grass-roots communities.

When I completed my degree, I wanted to DO popular education, not just STUDY it. Congruent with Freire's notion of "praxis," the dynamic integration of reflection and action.

For 20 years before becoming a York University professor in 1993, I was immersed in social movements, co-creating popular education projects around specific struggles and the connections between them.

In [The Moment Project](#), we gathered activists from multiple sectors to do a collective analysis of current issues and form coalitions to act together strategically.



500 Years workshops at Native Canadian Centre 1992



Facilitating a Naming the Moment workshop 1988

Every month, groups shared the perspective from their sector, breaking out of single issue siloes, forming alliances to act on the most critical issues of the moment.

From fighting against neoliberal free trade and for Indigenous self-determination in the 1980s, to promoting solidarity with Central American liberation struggles and [recovering the history of 500 years of Indigenous resistance](#) in the early 1990s.

We offered training in the [Naming the Moment methodology](#) to encourage participants to build political analysis for action into their own organizational practices.

Your first foray into teaching at 17 was apparently quite a disaster, Betsey. Your father offered your services to a local school, but after a week you walked straight home through the woods, declaring “never again.”

You told this story later, with good humour, when teaching teachers, assuring them that You can't possibly do worse than I did!⁴

On graduating from Oberlin in your 30s, with new confidence and determination, you ventured to southern Ohio, proclaiming Providence did not seem to open any door for me, so I pushed one open for myself!⁵

You had a long and varied career, first teaching in Portsmouth, near the Ohio River, and later in Massillon, Canton, and Hopedale, Ohio; and Bloomington, Illinois.

You were most happy to be appointed the Principal of the Female Department of the Grand River Institute (GRI) in Austinburg, where you planted 200 maple trees.

When your father first joined with other town leaders to found the GRI (now Grand River Academy) in 1831, the idea was to “combine physical, mental, and religious exercises... to ensure a free development of the mind.”



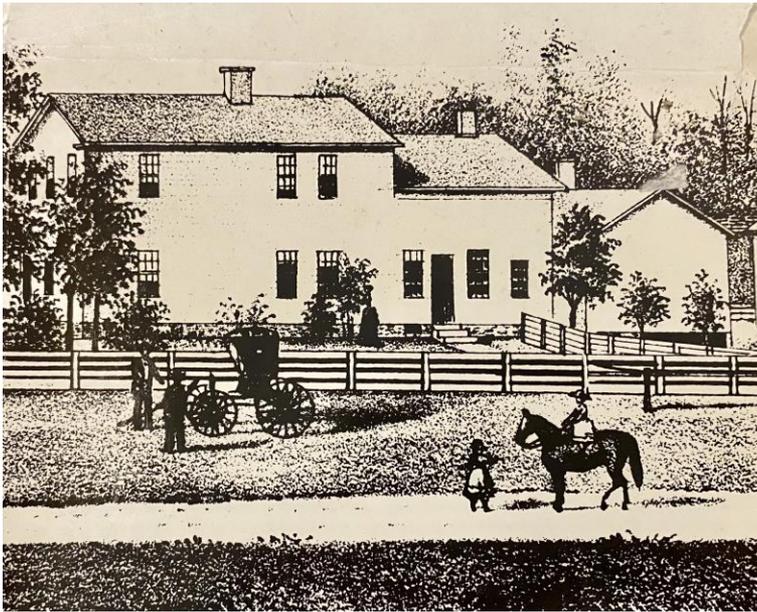
While GRI's mission was initially to prepare young men for the ministry, it opened its doors in 1840 to women, ostensibly to improve enrolment and finances.

As the first female principal, Betsey, you then integrated into your classroom “informal discourses on moral character,” along with teaching math, physiology, and vocal music.

The students called you “Aunt Betsey,” as you treated them with familiarity and compassion.



Your presence is remembered by the trees.



During your years at GRI (1843-48), you were also deeply engaged in the anti-slavery movement, and for you, education was key.

*Ignorance is the cause of indifference,
[and] ignorance is the parent of prejudice.⁶*

It fell to abolitionists to educate the nation about the facts of slavery and to convert those who supported slavery into educated, moral abolitionists.

Women had a particular role, in your view, because women were the traditional custodians of morality.

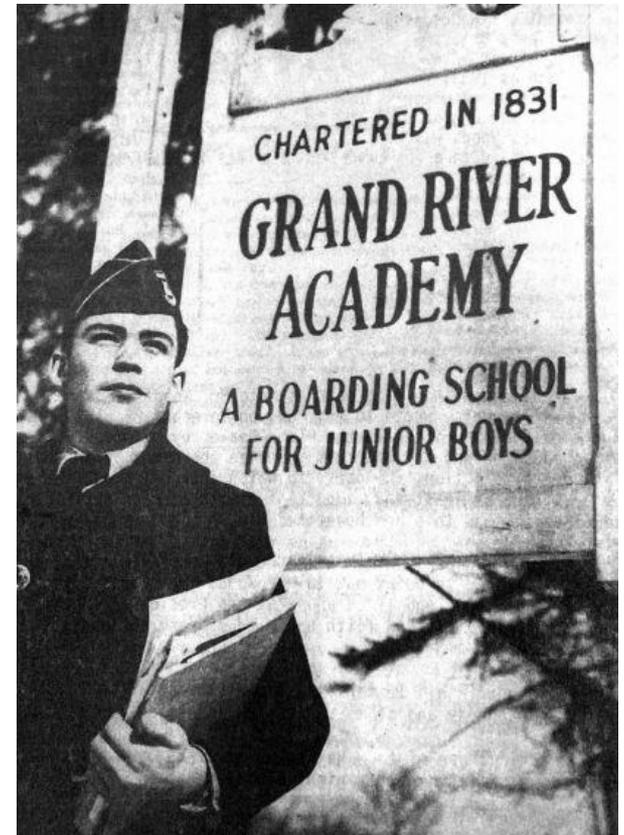
When I lived in Austinburg a century later, the Grand River Academy was primarily a private boarding school for wealthy boys from the Midwest and east coast.

Ten pews on the right-hand side of the church sanctuary were reserved for the entire population of the boys' school. Each Sunday, they marched in, a polite parade of blue blazers, to take their seats; church attendance was required, as part of their religious education.

I remember being insulted by one of the boys when he found out that my dad was the town's only minister. "You mean that your dad is that big mouth in the front?!" the boy blurted out.

In 1950s' Austinburg, residents were primarily white, rural, and working-class, so contact with the Grand River Academy exposed me to class and gender differences. The students were around my age (I was in grades 4 – 6, while they included 1 – 12).

I was intrigued with such a coterie of cute boys!



I had my own experience of their blue-blazer behaviour when I was invited as an 8, 9 and 10 year old to attend the annual dance. The dance was part of the boys' socialization into upper-crust society, their education in the manners of the elite.

The Academy administration first issued an invitation to the nearest private girls' school, but when short in numbers, the GRA would settle for a few "town girls."

*Picture my first introduction to the culture of the wealthy:
arriving at the Academy to a long line-up of 45 boys arranged by height, shortest to tallest.
All in blue blazers, corsages in their hands.*

A school chaperone matched each girl guest with a guy about her height.



I especially remember the year I was paired up with Thomas, a nine-year-old, who was being groomed in the proper etiquette of his class.

Throughout the night, he chose to practice taking my coat off in one building, then putting it on to move to another building, taking it off in the next place, putting it on soon after, etc. A kind of dance in chivalry training!

I soon learned that Thomas had mastered another skill.

Because he excelled in the ballroom dancing classes, we won the prize for the best waltzing couple in our age group..!

When I visited the school with my sister in 2024, she and I danced on the porch in memory of our 1950s adventures.

According to their current website, the [Grand River Academy](#) now serves boys in grades 8 through 12, with a post-graduate option. Admissions prioritize "boys who may not be reaching their full potential in a traditional high school environment for a variety of reasons."

A far cry from your gathering of women discussing anti-slavery movements in your GRI classes, Betsey.

Teaching was your passion, as it was for me.

You were so good at it, that you soon got offered jobs as a superintendent of schools—very unusual for women. You also taught at Normal Schools, preparing teachers.

You were respected as a skilled manager in these positions, but I wonder if you ever felt that these administrative jobs took you away from the intimate interaction with students that you loved so much.

I had a short stint as an associate dean at my university, But I really preferred the classroom, where we could create our own magic.

Bringing popular education into the university classroom was subversive. [Circles](#), storytelling, [the arts](#), [singing](#), and food in the academy challenged the colonial hierarchical structure of our universities, and their increasing shift towards corporate business models.



In 2005 I founded the Community Arts Practice certificate, a joint program between Fine Arts and Environmental Studies at York University.

Its capstone was a fourth-year practicum with a local community arts organization (theatre, murals, music, film and photography, etc.), or a social justice group using the arts to build participation in social change.

I realize now that focusing on the arts was also a survival strategy for me, as it was one of the only legitimate ways to bring both body and spirit into the academy.

Our Faculty of Environmental Studies encouraged graduate students to use the arts as a mode of inquiry, creative expression, and community engagement. My supervisees became my teachers and community animators.

I think of Sabrina, who organized the first International Pollinator Festival, with bee workshops, a cabaret of poetry, video and song; as well as multimedia exhibits, her hive frames honouring bee-friendly gardens in three North American cities.

(I felt a strong connection with this project, Betsey. My name, Deborah, means “bee” in Hebrew, and I have often identified as a pollinator – of both people and ideas).

I think of Melanie. who involved families in her hometown in making puppets for a Summer Solstice parade that culminated in a theatre production in a city park.



These and other student-designed events offered collective and creative embodied ways for people to reconnect with the more-than-human, and to see ourselves within natural processes.



Others found ways to unearth difficult histories.

Ann's "Visualizing Absence" project combined archival research on a mental health institution and residential school survivors with participatory exhibits that gave voice to the former "inmates" and care-givers.

I joined a powerful ritual of placing white flags on unmarked graves, naming the unnamed after decades of silence.

*The trees were there,
witnesses to a dark history of colonialism and cultural genocide,
watching over those who [reconnected with relatives](#).*

As associate dean, I initiated a collective process of Transforming Space Into Place when we moved into a new building. (Faculties of Environmental Studies and of Health took over the old business school!)

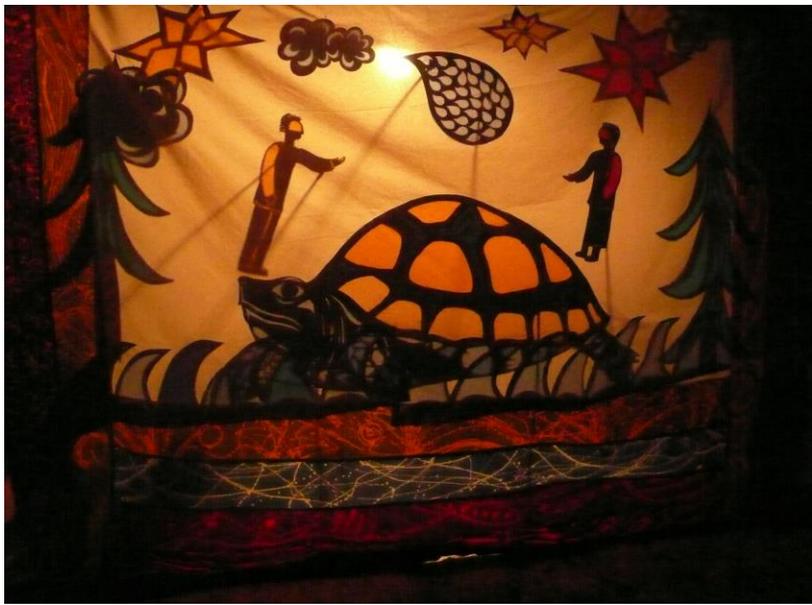
15 student-led projects brought colour and energy into classrooms, hallways, and lounges.

The lobby now welcomes all with an enormous mural produced by students through a year-long process.

Entitled "Gesundheit" (or Health), it challenges the separation of nature and culture, connecting rural and urban activities, referencing recent tensions on campus around race, disability, gender.

*I love the tree/body fused
Framing the flow of water, earth, and sky.*





The Community Arts Program involved local community artists as advisors. Some of my students collaborated with them, collecting their stories in [VIVA! Community Arts and Popular Education in the Americas](#).

Maggie worked with Jumblies Theatre on the “Bridge of One Hair,” a three-year project with over 100 community residents and artists culminating in a production that included fabric art, theatre, music, shadow puppets (left), and a tea party..!

The annual Eco Art and Media Festival I co-founded with students in 1994 created space for communities, voices, and art forms not always seen or heard in the academy.



Among the most moving moments for me:

Sol Express, a creative arts group of young adults with developmental disabilities performing in my classroom.

A Gospel Choir singing freedom songs in the student lounge, cheered on by a racialized building cleaner who passed by.

I love how these two groups challenged any notion of whose and which knowledge “counts” in a university context.

Does any of this resonate with you, Betsey?



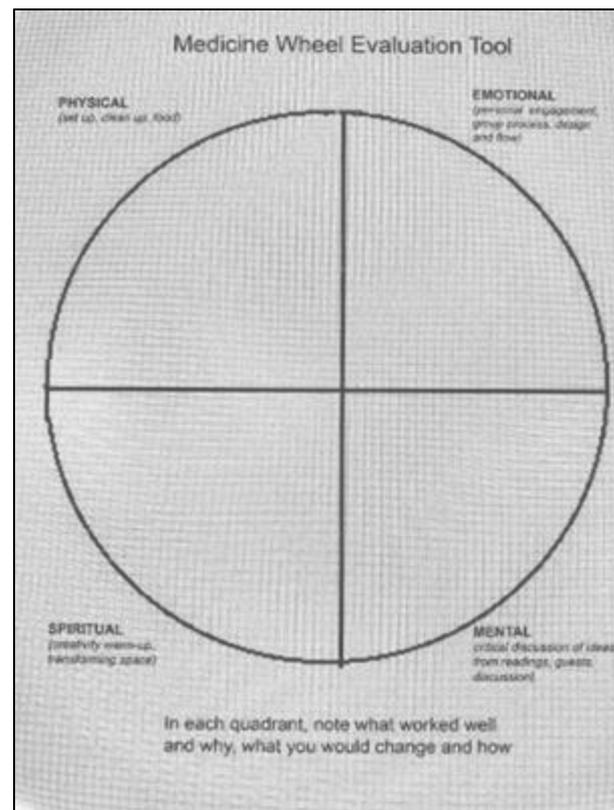
Two circles help me sum it up.

I've drawn from the [Medicine Wheel Teachings](#) of Anishinaabe practice, to consider learning as a holistic process that integrates the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of ourselves.

When Mohawk Elder Marlene Brant Castellano spoke to my Popular Education class in the 1990s, she drew a lopsided medicine wheel in which the mental quadrant took up $\frac{3}{4}$ of the space; this was how she saw most western educational contexts, ignoring the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of learning.

I adapted a more multisensory notion of learning with an evaluation tool that asked students to reflect at the end of each class, by jotting down their learnings that might correspond to the four dimensions.

Exercising muscles in holistic knowing, thinking and acting!.



I have also used a [circle](#) to frame our VIVA! Project, and to illustrate the interconnections between four processes central to my practice of teaching and learning for social justice.

This approach integrates theory and practice within a broader process of decolonization, combining participatory action research, community arts, and popular education.

Or more simply stated: place, politics, passion, praxis.

But something's missing here. My mentor Paulo Freire emphasized that genuine popular education could not happen without respect, dialogue, and love.

The word "love" isn't used regularly when talking about post-secondary education. I often felt that I fell in love with the students, and they fell in love with each other when we were really able to collectively create a climate of mutual learning.

We were always dealing with institutional requirements and interpersonal power dynamics and, particularly in the undergrad classes, when I was responsible for "marking" them; even though I also required self and group evaluations, I still wielded the ultimate power.

A narrative, pass/fail system at the graduate level changed the power dynamic a bit, as students were evaluated according to their own learning objectives, replacing competition with self-reflexivity and collaboration.

There were those few special moments when we were learning together, when students found their own voice, when they were moved to action. A treasure box of cards and letters that students have given me over the years confirms this.

*You clearly loved, and were adored by, your students, Betsey.
That was clear in what one student wrote after you left her school:*

*...you have left a void in our hearts
with [sic] nothing but your presence [sic] can fill....
a single heart lives in this town to remember
to record the memory of her who was beloved of all....'*

*For who can fill your place deserted,
who so kind, so true, so noble hearted, who.?*

*Sometimes students gifted me pieces of art,
like a blanket with a quilted tree crafted
by Sheelagh based in the British Columbia forests,
my favourite cover for afternoon naps..!*

*Or a painting of trees in northern Canada
by [Antoine](#), a Dene artist from Nunavut.*



Trees on fire,
trees that comfort.

I've written articles and books about my formative experiences in popular education in [Peru](#), [Nicaragua](#), and [Central America](#), and about how the [arts enrich social activism](#).

While working outside of formal schooling, in grassroots programs in the Americas, I received an International Adult Education award.

Still, daring to use those participatory processes in the academy was not easy. I sometimes felt as though what happened in my classroom was a secret not to be shared, that it would be misunderstood.

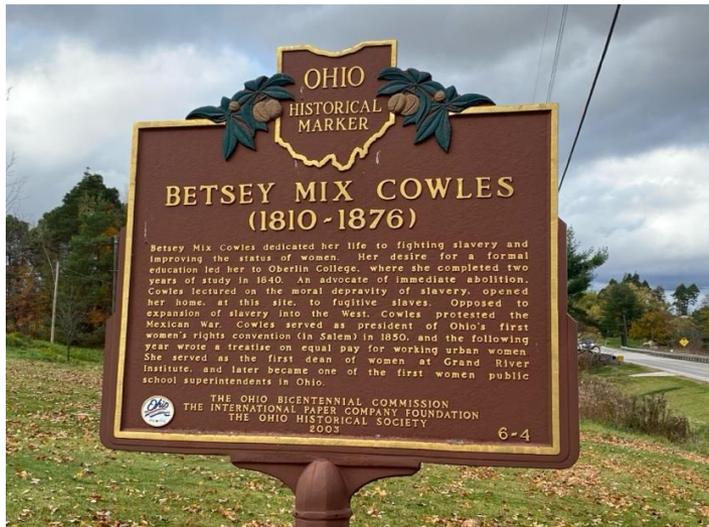
Before I was granted tenure, I was the target of a vicious 16-page memo circulated to everyone by a senior professor, attacking me for my role in drafting an affirmative action policy that included racial identity.

Nonetheless, after 15 years, I was honoured with the first teaching award as well as the first award for community engagement in my home Faculty.

I value as much the Min Sook Lee Labour Arts Award for life-time achievement, from the Mayworks Festival of Working People and the Arts, an award named for a former student and artistic collaborator who has taught me so much.



With Min Sook Lee at Mayworks Awards Gala



Your awards were more broad-reaching, and some came long after your death. In 1989, you were inducted into the Ohio Women's Hall of Fame, then honoured in 2003 with an Ohio Bicentennial Marker, installed in front of your house and on the national Votes for Women's Trail.

One of the ways you practiced popular education, Betsey, was contributing articles to the Child's Friend and Family Magazine. You wrote informally in plain language to speak to children, with upbeat and moral messages.

These "Letters to Frank" didn't shy away from critical issues like slavery and wilderness survival, using stories to make the serious issues personal and accessible.

I always tried to centre stories in my publications, too, believing that they ground important issues in peoples' daily lives, make them more real and relatable.



There is an important common ground in our teaching, Betsey.

You brought your social commitments – anti-slavery, human rights, moral issues – into your classes.

Whether you were teaching sciences like astronomy or arts like music, you used creative and engaging methods.

You saw the interconnections between all of the issues and disciplines. We now call this an “intersectional analysis,” and use “holistic approaches” to learning. Though both are now being challenged in the U.S. and even in Canada.

For me, these approaches resonate with Indigenous understandings of “all our relations” (including the more-than-human) and ways of knowing and being that integrate the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of learning.

So central to your life's mission were your vocation of teaching and your anti-slavery activism, that when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, you exclaimed that the two major goals in your life were now complete:

you had finished your teaching and the slaves were free.⁸

But you had other projects in mind....



1. Betsey quoted in Linda L. Geary. *Balanced in the Wind: A Biography of Betsey Mix Cowles*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses. 1989, 34.
2. Ibid., 73
- 3.
4. Page 9
5. Page 9: Quoted in Harriet L. Keeler. Excerpt from *The History of Ashtabula County*. Published in 1878, reprinted in 1974.
6. Quoted in Debbie Weitbush, "Betsy Mix Cowles: Educator, Abolitionist, Reformer." Unpublished essay for Civil War Seminar, June 7, 1976, 1..
7. Quoted in Geary, 86.
Page 20: Ibid., 16.