

Exploring Collective Learning Conversations in Economics Education: An Autoethnographic Perspective

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ABSTRACT Scholars of transformative learning theory believe that central to critical pedagogy is the idea that schools and lecture rooms can be places where critical communities can be started. These scholars argue that for critical pedagogy to have an impact, transformative learning is an important “space” for discourse to change the way an individual comes to a new understanding of something that causes a fundamental paradigm shift. This paper explores the collective learning conversations by drawing from culturally diverse student voices in Economics Education. This paper is a critical reflection of personal challenges encountered during the teaching of Economics in a culturally diverse setting. In applying an autoethnographical approach, I rethink my experiences and draw from diverse Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) student voices (n=7) through a reflective assignment. In summation, strategies are provided for building creative learning spaces within and beyond the classroom.

INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND

Reflection in education is a field full of promises: promises for improving professional proficiency, for fostering personal growth and for increasing social justice. (Procee 2006, p. 252)

Over the past two decades, researchers in the humanities and social sciences have shown a growing interest in using narrative inquiry-based research, biographical approaches, life histories and other qualitative methods. In line with this narrative turn, teacher educators have applied storytelling and (auto)biographical reflection in their practices. Scholars of transformative learning theory believe that schools and lecture rooms can be places where critical communities can be started. Education for social justice, especially Economics education, can be extremely rewarding, but also incredibly emotionally challenging (Hooks 1994; Boler 2003). Because of the challenge of discomfort, building critical communities is an essential component to social justice activist teaching (Bettez 2008). Students not only need the skills and knowledge to reflect and act upon the world in order to transform it (Freire 2003; Wink 2007); they also need support networks to sustain them in their practices and in the inevitable resultant struggles. Although critically thoughtful writings are needed on how teachers and students work together, I argue that, as teachers, we should also be promoting community building among our

students. Doing so will not only strengthen much needed support networks, but will also encourage our students to practise interdependence. In this specific study, I reflect on my personal experiences and challenges on a scholarship-of-teaching journey by drawing from culturally diverse student voices through a reflective assignment which served as stimulation for collective learning. I also created opportunities for my students by enhancing critical learning spaces in Economics Education.

In summation, this paper reflects personal experiences and challenges encountered in creating critical and creative learning spaces in Economics Education. Conceptualised transformative learning, a ‘critical community’, is explained for the purpose of this study. I apply an autoethnographical method as my research methodological approach. Furthermore, I provide reasons for building critical communities in Economics Education; drawing from diverse student voices which serve as stimulating forces for creative learning conversations.

APPLYING A TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING FRAMEWORK

Scholars believe that central to critical pedagogy is the idea that schools and lecture rooms can be places where critical communities can be started; that through dialogue, we are enlightened about the conditions that rob some mem-

bers of society of their freedom, dignity, and hope (Viskovic 2006; Biesta 1998; Brookfield 2003). Mezirow (1991) mentions that although transformative learning involves paradigm shifts: as this has been evident in me, as well as in some of my Economics Education students, we started a collective learning process during class discussions on contemporary economic issues. Profound personal change, explicit to the theory, is that such changes emerge from a dialectic engagement among a group of students with diverse perspectives. Transformative learning is more than a rational undertaking. Mezirow (1991) and Cranton (2006) argue that transformative learning offers a lens to examine what is implied by 'a call to transform your scholarship of teaching, discovery and engagement'. I believe that 'transformation' suggests a dramatic change for the better; transformative learning theory explores how that change comes about. Transformative learning occurs when, through critical questioning of ourselves, our beliefs and our expectations, we experience a deep shift in perspective which leads us to a new way of being in the world. Moreover, Mezirow (1991) posits that transformation is a self-directed and voluntary process: although we can facilitate and support transformative processes in others, we cannot transform someone else, only ourselves. Transformation requires a deep, honest, authentic and open engagement in learning from all who are involved in the process. Brookfield (2003:13) postulates that transformative learning has been subject to widespread misuses and should be understood as Mezirow's original theory of adult learning intended it to be: a deep and profound altering of one's world-view; an apocalyptic event. This particular study refers to a dialogic discourse of a personal scholarship-of-teaching journey which involves an assessment of the beliefs, feelings and values of the culturally diverse students. I believe that the transformative learning framework has been underutilised in scholarly discovery discourse. It is my contention that, at present, learning communities focus their efforts on the means of teaching and not its ends. When studying these best practices as a form of learning, it shows incompleteness in the critical collective learning processes. In proposing an alternative, I wish to look more closely at critical pedagogy and transformative learning theories to build critical Economics Education communities which are able to reflect critically

upon both their own actions and their social contexts in which these actions are framed.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF A 'CRITICAL COMMUNITY'

I argue that it is important for Economics Education teachers, as well my students, to promote 'critical communities', in particular in their respective classrooms and beyond. Critical theory creates the possibility to see what may have otherwise been unimaginable to us; it "calls our attention to places where choices have been made, and it clarifies whose goals those choices have served" (Schaps 2009; Hinchey 1998:15). Several critical theories have emerged that can help us clarify what 'critical' signifies. Simpson (2010) adroitly uncovers what being critical entails through a description of the themes found in the main tenets of critical race theory, critical pedagogy and critical communication pedagogy. Schaps (2009:9), for example, argues for the importance of creating classrooms and school communities founded on relationships that are "respectful" and "supportive". This stance is supported by Hooks's (2003) publication entitled: *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, which focuses exclusively on teacher-student relationships. Hooks offers practical wisdom for classroom practice where life-sustaining and mind-expanding experiences in partnership can be built, especially with the South African education system in mind. Although the promotion of 'teacher learning communities' in teacher education programmes is growing in popularity, I contend that it is crucial, especially for the South African education system. The purpose of critical community work is to create nurturing spaces where we can interdependently and collectively read the world through a critical lens which challenges domination, encourages thoughtful questions and recognises that people operate with values and cultural assumptions that are informed by historical and sociopolitical contexts (Shor 1992; Kincheloe 2007). Emanating from the latter, I critically reflect on my scholarly journey of discovery in becoming a researcher and draw from culturally diverse students' views to create critical communities in Economics Education. My view is that, ultimately, the support of critical communities can empower us to take action against oppression whether it is on the micro level through interactions with friends, family,

peers, and students or on the macro level of striving to create institutional change.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Method

A critical transformative learning perspective was used. I applied an autoethnographical method as my research methodological approach. I have a critical responsibility to acknowledge, respect and understand students from diverse backgrounds. In applying an autoethnographical approach, I rethink my experiences and draw from diverse student voices through a reflective assignment. In my Economics Education classroom environment where culturally diverse students are represented, autoethnography is an important tool to aid in our understanding of each other's backgrounds. As a sociological form of autobiography, autoethnography helps me and my students to step outside our immediate personal constraints in order to examine our social world through new eyes. I believe therefore that autoethnography, as a research method and educational practice, is a promising way to promote personal transformation which, in turn, leads to cross-cultural understanding and social change.

Sampling and Data Collection

My experiences in the classroom, particularly those with my Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) Economics Education students (n=49), are what led me to write this article. I did not initially set out to examine community building; it emerged as being relevant after listening to students making specific mention of community, as well as observing specific community building actions that they undertook. These, in turn, led me to self-reflect on my experiences and to read more of the literature in this area, which prompted me to employ auto-ethnography as a method (Le Fevre 2011). As part of the semester module mark for ECT 122 (Teaching methods and media), a research assignment on community engagement is compulsory for all students (n=49). To augment my stories, I elicited opinions from some students on the topic of sustainable community building via e-mail, and obtained permission to incorporate comments from one student's work from the subject reflective assignment. To

frame my work, I drew from my Economics Education students' voices; they served to guide my self-reflective process of critically analysing my experiences and thoughts about community building.

Ethical Considerations

Before I could begin with the study, I obtained consent from the students. I explained the purpose of the study and decided beforehand to use pseudonyms for the names of the students who participated in this study. I then explained the purpose of confidentiality to the students. The students agreed that I could use their first names, namely: *Kabelo*, *Maleke*, *John*, *Corné*, *Jessica*, *Ratshoane* and *Clare* in the study. I chose these PGCE subject method students (n=7) because they represent particular social class, ethnicity, race and cultural groupings in this study. I was really surprised by the stance of the students, who did not want to be anonymised. They regarded their 'critical voices' as public testimony and stated that they were looking forward to seeing their personal discourses as part of this research paper.

Emanating from the methodological considerations, I alluded to my scholarship-of-teaching journey in creating learning conversations by citing my personal experiences as an example of a reflective journey. I contend that we need to create communities of practice within academia. I therefore focus on specific reasons why I feel we need to build creative learning conversations among Economics Education students.

A REFLECTIVE JOURNEY IN CREATING LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

Hall (2007) and Schaps (2009) opine that scholarly discovery is often isolated, challenging, individualised work, whereas developing communities can help sustain us as individuals in the lone-wolf process of academia. The researcher's contention is that although there are many reasons one could put forward in support of the need to create community within academia, The researcher focuses on specific reasons why the researchers feel we need to foster critical communities among Economics Education students. The researcher argues that critical communities might help alleviate the negative feelings and difficulties which result from the fact

that academic work is often a frustrating and lonely process, intellectually challenging and emotionally taxing, in the quest to eradicate academic mediocrity.

Scholarly Discovery is a Timorous, Painful, Frustrating and Lonely Process

I well remember the challenges I faced during my doctoral studies. It was a painful and time consuming process. You rewrote, reflected and resubmitted your academic work but still it was not 'good' enough as an example of your scholarly work. The feedback may not be constructive to support you as a student because your promoter is not conversant with your area of investigation. Sometimes the feedback was destructive instead of building your academic writing skills. I read alone, most often wrote alone, usually taught alone, and frequently thought and processed alone. I experienced frustration about how my white mentor did not understand me as a person: my feelings and my culture. Through informal conversations and students' autobiographical writing assignments, I have heard similar stories from diverse students during my teaching career. Gay (2000) argues that graduate students of colour encounter discrimination, hostility, isolation, tokenism and marginality. Their intellectual capabilities are doubted, and their research interests are often viewed as suspect or demeaned. When they try to claim the same prerogatives as granted to their mainstream peers (such as researching and writing about things of personal and cultural relevance to them) they are discouraged, silenced and sometimes even abandoned. Assisting my Economics Education students in creating critical communities has the potential to counterbalance feelings of isolation. Moreover, as illustrated in the previous examples, these critical communities may be especially crucial for the success of students who are not part of the dominant culture.

Extremely Academically Challenging

My first experience of academic life, especially as an academic staff member in our faculty, was extremely academically challenging. While university students of colour may experience a sense of disconnection from their home cultures due to their investment in the academy, they may also experience a sense of exclusion from par-

ticular cultures and discourses. New students often feel that they are not smart enough to engage in class discussions because they do not know 'the discourse.' These feelings of self-doubt may be particularly strong for older students who have been out of school for long time; for students who do not have English as their first language; for students who did not attend intellectually rigorous undergraduate programmes; and for many other non-traditional students (Hooks 2000; Gay 2004; Lobnibe 2009). I could, as an academic and a black student, relate to all these challenges. According to Hall (2007), students should learn to be "multivoiced", to vary how they express themselves depending on context and to whom they are speaking. He argues that "being multivoiced in this way means being aware of our conversation partners' needs and placing their need to understand above our own desire to express ourselves in intellectually self-serving ways" (p.77). Moreover, Delpit (2006) argues that some students, by virtue of past experiences and access to the "culture of power", are better equipped than others to learn and engage in various academic discourses. My stance is that through creating critical communities in Economics Education to promote collective teaching and learning, in which peers who are more versed in academic discourse and in academic codes of power are encouraged to use multivocality to assist less experienced students.

Emotionally Demanding Experience

I experienced that, in the beginning, academic writing was an emotionally taxing experience. Those of us who teach about issues of identity, social class, economic justice, race and privilege know that this work is not only intellectually challenging, but can also be rewarding. Research studies conducted on emotional work involved in learning about social foundational issues of how privilege and oppression operate in society is highlighted by Kumashiro (2004), Boler (2003) and Hooks (1994). Moreover, discussions pertaining to social class, identity and race, for example, often lead to emotionally difficult dialogues because "pedagogical attention to social class and race in any given classroom is never isolated from broader debates" (Simpson et al. 2007: 34). What I have found among my Economics Education students is that as they dis-

cover through the ‘spaces’ of dialogue differences and begin to better understand their experiences of oppression and others’ experiences of racial privilege they often become, understandably, angry. In the social foundations of education literature, there are many writings about the struggles that white students face as they find their world views being challenged (Boler 2003; Hytten and Warren 2003; Thompson 2003; Warren and Hytten 2004; Diem 2008); students of colour have their own unique experiences as they learn about social justice. Recently, in a modular reflective assignment in which my students were asked to describe what they had been learning in the module, Kabelo, a black female student, linked her undergraduate experience in the Economics Education as way to express her views on economic injustice about how a particular factory owner exploited and underpaid his workers from the particular reflective assignment. She ended her reflection by stating:

I really enjoyed your Economics Education sessions. I experienced a freedom of expression; I felt the ‘comradeship’, I really treasured the debates on contemporary issues of economic injustice and privilege which made sense. I look forward to continuing my struggle-ridden transformation. I expect significant development as a result of the past eight weeks and know development will continue throughout my life. I sense my social wings are sprouting, ready to fly. I also sense something else happening. I realise my struggle is not an individual struggle. My struggle is joining with others’ struggles.

Part of Kabelo’s and other students’ experiences and understanding of the struggle being collective, and not individual, comes from different views, and from the reminders from our sociologically orientated authors that there is always interplay between individuals and groups and between people and institutions. But I also hear from her, and other students in the class, that the sense of collectivity comes about through our classroom community.

CREATING COLLECTIVE LEARNING SPACES IN THE CLASSROOM

My teaching practice is grounded in critical pedagogy, life histories, reflective teaching practices, economic justice and culturally responsive teaching. I strive to create a conducive classroom atmosphere in which students are expected

to think critically, fulfil high expectations, make personal connections to the newspaper readings during class discussions and take ownership of their learning process. One of my central contentions in this article is that we can begin building critical and creative communities in the classroom. Although I believe it is important to build critical and collective learning communities that extend *beyond* the classroom, assisting students to build critical communities can, and perhaps must, first begin *in* the classroom. There are a number of critical community building strategies that I use in my Economics Education contact sessions, including incorporating students in the process of teaching and learning (scholarship of teaching); providing engaging readings, teaching, and group activities (sustainable praxis); combining intellect with the heart; and actively facilitating in a dynamic (scholarship of engagement), artful manner. In the remainder of the article I explain each of these strategies, drawing upon student voices and my own experience, and then discuss how community building can radiate beyond the bounds of the classroom.

Enhancing a Scholarship Engagement

Seven years ago, I started my teaching career in higher education. Inexperienced and faced with many challenges, I found that teaching adult learners at higher learning institutions was a totally new experience. Most colleagues were very negative regarding the scholarship of discovery and especially community involvement. Throughout my professional career, resilience was my best and closest partner. I faced many challenges during my short journey in a quest for the scholarship of discovery, teaching and community engagement. As alluded to earlier, writing academically was emotionally taxing and stressful. Resilience pushed me through my stress barriers of academic disappointments. I decided to turn my disappointments into appointments and opportunities by focusing on my purpose and contributions as a member of faculty staff. There was no point in being bitter or negative, but rather in valuing my position in our faculty. I changed my perspective regarding my professional career and started to research my praxis. I refocused and channelled my energy positively by completing my doctoral study in three years. Jawitz (2009b) conducted a study entitled *Learning in the academic workplace*:

The harmonization of the collective and individual habitus. This particular study inspired me to write my journey of scholarship of teaching by creating opportunities for my Economics Education students to reflect critically on their experiences in the classroom. As part of the semester module mark, a research assignment on community engagement is compulsory for all students. Through this assignment, Economics Education students explore why women in rural communities engage in entrepreneurial activities. We co-designed a survey for collecting data. Ratshoane remarked: *I felt empowered and enjoyed your session on how to design a questionnaire to collect data for the purpose of conducting our research.* John (white student) said: *I understood how women in rural communities struggle to earn a living. I appreciated how this module was constructed to support and empowering us in community involvement.*

I started writing collaboratively with a couple of critical friends. Several research papers were published nationally and internationally. In fewer than three years, my scholarship of discovery increased and I researched the scholarship of teaching. In writing this manuscript, I acknowledged and appreciated my critical friends and readers' valuable and constructive feedback on the scholarship of teaching and community engagement.

Creating Critical Reading Groups

My colleagues and I started a critical reading group. Our intention was to write collaboratively on current issues in relation to teacher education. Our different critical reading groups tackled readings on Freire's (2003) work: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Kincheloe's (2007) *Critical Pedagogy: Where Are We Now*; Hooks's (2003) *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*; and Bakhtin's (1981) *The dialogical imagination*. These readings helped us to build up critical pedagogy discourses as stimulating forces for developing critical communities of practice among ourselves and our postgraduate students. Our stance was not to foster any academic mediocrity in our work. I decided that I would rather send my work to international journals, from which I received quite surprising and valuable, positive feedback and excellent comments regarding my research work from the unknown reviewers. These reviewers provided excellent,

constructive responses regarding how and why I could improve my work. International journals have been open and transparent to my research, and reviewers have given constructive comments on issues relating to my work. Building community is an integrated process that happens with colleagues and my fellow students through readings, classroom activities and personal interactions (within and outside of the classroom). Thus, while working on this paper, I sent an e-mail to a few Economics Education students asking for feedback on their experiences of building community in my classes to assist me in analysing the community building process. This is what one white student, John, stated:

For me, I have felt a sense of community within your classes more than in most of the other courses I have taken (at the faculty and my schools). I think a lot of it has to do with your idea of both teaching and 'studenting' and the responsibility of the students in your class to be partners in the process. There are amazing 'A-ha!' moments, such as the simulated Economics games or during last semester, when we used role playing of certain articles to express themes.

John names several teaching and learning strategies and techniques that can lead to community building in the classroom. Drawing upon his words, I describe below how each of the strategies he mentions can facilitate critical community building.

Students as Partners in Collective Learning

In teaching for economic justice, I strive to make my students partners in the process of teaching and learning, a process that can contribute to a cohesive classroom community. A real teacher-students relationship as partners in collective learning can only be established in Economics Education if the teacher as the 'power holder' creates dialogical spaces for his/her students to grow academically, emotionally and socially. My Economics Education class is an empowering 'collective learning space'. In this learning space, a powerful learning environment is created to promote a sense of belonging and build sound teacher-student relationships for collective learning. In such an environment, students take responsibility for their learning, seize opportunities to teach others, and utilise their knowledge to effect change. We sometimes team-

teach and peer-teach on economic justice issues, such as poverty or unemployment, and build relationships long after the classroom practice is over. One female student, Clare, reflected on collective learning:

As a critical reflective teacher, I must be conscientious about my praxis. I must be sure to emphasise the importance of critical reading and creating space for my students to share and theorise personal experiences. I think through very carefully not only what I hope to cover in a class, but how, because I realize that the pedagogy is as important, if not more so, than the content.

My own reflections, at the same time, show that I allow for flexibility in my lesson plans in order to be able to respond to unexpected student needs. I still remember how we planned together for a class lesson on the topic of unemployment. As part of the investment and responsibility for the classroom community, I often have the students collectively create class ground rules that we can use to guide our interactions with one another. Asking students to invest in the teaching and learning process requires that I too invest in and respond to their needs. I elicit feedback and input from students on content and pedagogy, continually emphasising that teaching and learning in my classroom involves partnership. Nonetheless, there are still issues of power with which to contend between my position as an Associate Professor and the position of my students, who ultimately are evaluated by and receive marks from me. Receiving and responding to student feedback, through formal (mid-semester) evaluations and consultation (via e-mail responses and individual meetings) is one way to mediate that power differential. In addition, I provide lengthy feedback in response to individual assignments, making it as clear as possible how I assessed students' work and why they received a particular mark. This allows students the opportunity to respond and at times, challenge my assessment. I have had several students come to my office to talk to me about my responses to their assignments. These are often pivotal moments; in the best circumstances they lead to an increased awareness and action for all of us and promote connection. This teacher-student relationship in Economics Education is an example of a partnership which serves as a model for building critical communities in our classrooms.

Integrate Interactive and Participative Classroom Activities

Like many academics, the researcher put a lot of thought into how interactive newspaper readings and collective activities are coupled and organised, being conscientious about what to promote in a reflective approach in the Economics classroom. Additionally, the researcher utilises a number of different activities that encourage students to engage intellectually and emotionally with the readings. The researcher incorporates a variety of edutainment-based activities including performances, drawing and Economics games. For example, the researcher asks students to create visual images or mind-maps that represent economic justice theories, and have students create performances that parallel moral dilemmas raised in teacher narratives (personal stories). Maleke, a student, noted:

I enjoy your edutainment strategies and contemporary newspaper clippings as very effective activities. It supports my learning style; it promotes accountability and shared learning amongst students. We are together as a collective in learning. We are working as a team by sharing and reflecting on our experiences.

The researcher uses these activities not only to cater for distinct learning styles, promote joy in learning and elicit critical thinking, but also to promote collective engagement with content, requiring students to work with and learn from one another. Such activities can be incorporated specifically to emphasise community, particularly in moments of conflict in the classroom. For example, following a particularly difficult class dialogue about racism, where some students shared deep words of pain and others shed tears, the researcher allowed students to record their thoughts and emotions. From this class discussion activity emerged a collective learning experience on how to deal with "gender stereotyping", which eventually led to an activity inspired by Boler (2003), where students were required to work together to craft a collective image with their bodies that represented community building. This process served as a model that collective work can continue, even in the face of conflict. Through the image creation and discussion, students analysed what community building entails and why it is important. Furthermore, the researcher's experience with integrated interactive Economics group activities helps to break down

barriers between students by encouraging working in collaboration with one another. It also promotes interaction between teacher and student which often, by working together in unprovoked ways, develops closer relationships. If we wish to promote community in our classrooms, we must be conscientious about our pedagogy and deliberate in our efforts.

Promoting a Connection among Students as Partnership ‘Glue’

This idea, of combining the spiritual and emotional aspects and cognitive intellect into the classroom, is not new. It proves to be a powerful force to enhance critical communities. Many critical scholars (Hooks 1994; Freire 2003; West 2008) have emphasised the importance of love in the classroom; love in the struggle for social justice; love as the way to fight oppression. According to Hooks (1994), the need to cultivate a mind-body connection as a learner and a teacher is of the utmost importance in strengthening relationships in the classroom. Moreover, Palmer (2007) and Bettez (2008) argue that teachers should strive to promote an emotional and spiritual intelligence connection among students by urging them to pay attention, not only to what they think, but to how they feel. As a partner in the mind-body connection process of my students, I also often acknowledge and name my emotional-spiritual connections as they relate to my intellectual thoughts. Furthermore, Peck (2003:85) defines love as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth”. I still remember that Jessica, a white female student, once said to me something to the effect of “I love how you sometimes share with us what and how you are feeling; hardly any lecturers do that”. Curious about why my style seemed anomalous, I probed for more information. Jessica gave an example, stating:

I still remember last week. You started off class by asking us how our week had been. A few students said it had been rough and hectic. You acknowledged them and added that you too had felt overwhelmed and wondered how you were going to finish our activities and readings as well, because of all the school holidays. For my class mates and I that mattered; to know that you too sometimes are pushing things to the last minute, struggling to get it all done. We knew now how both are feeling.

Conscientious about the content and quantity of what I share, I know that there is a fine line between taking up too much “space” and telling stories to promote teacher-student relationship connections in the Economics Education environment. I strive to model a mind-body connection through strategic storytelling with my diverse student groups. In an institution that generally devalues the importance of love and heart, we (lecturers and students) must muster the courage to love, to think with the heart and to interact with compassion. My experience is that a good teacher-student relationship can be the cornerstone of creating critical communities. Further research studies have revealed that this sharing serves as a form of counter narrative to dominant hegemonic notions of disembodied learning that privileges a particular kind of white, patriarchal, ‘rational’ form of learning and ideology (Nilson 2009; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Ladson-Billings and Tate 2006).

Enhancing Co-facilitation Activities to Encourage a Critical Self-reflection

In his book on the academic community, Hall (2007) argues for teaching students collegiality, which can be accomplished, in part, through “artful facilitation”. He explains:

Collegiality means responsible citizenship within our institutions, embracing the same qualities that one would hope for in responsible citizens of the nation and globe: thoughtfulness, attentiveness to the needs of others, and a willingness to listen carefully and engage in meaningful communication across and in spite of differences (pp. 67–68).

Collegiality, defined thus, is a key skill in the process of community building. Teachers, through skilled facilitation and knowledge sharing, are responsible for guiding students through the process of strengthening their abilities to be collegial. According to Bettez (2008), “artful facilitation” is a skill related to all the other components previously mentioned because it involves encouraging self-reflective engagement, creating collaborative group activities promoting multivocality, and interacting with compassion and heart. Facilitation, or the lack thereof, can fracture or congeal a classroom community. This became strikingly apparent to me in a particular class when a student was teaching an article (one of the required course assignments, which allow

students to practise facilitation) and the discussion, about privilege, became heated. I vividly remember an incident of how one facilitating student, Corn , verbalised a long list of stereotypes which offended several other class members. Many of us had visceral reactions to Corn 's statements and the tension in the room was palpable. We were all amazed, and some were even in a state of shock and astonishment. After waiting to see how the teaching student would react, I stepped in to mediate. However, at that moment, given that the stereotypes uttered were related to part of my identity as a black person, I was experiencing my own emotionally distressing reactions to the comment. As I paused to breathe, another student, Ratshoane, who had been in my classes and had seen me model facilitation, noting my distress, jumped in to assist me by confronting Corn  and holding him accountable for his actions. Ratshoane did so by making a statement about how he felt offended by Corn 's comments and then posing a critical question to him:

I felt very bad about what you said. It seems you are not serious about 'others' in our class. How could you do that... it amazed me. Why did you mention that 'blacks' are lazy and corrupt?

Another student, who had also taken my Elementary Economics class previously, helped Corn  to see what was problematic about his statements by also posing questions and making critically thoughtful comments. Thus together, the students and I engaged in collective facilitation to promote dialogue, point out discriminatory statements, and foster empathy and understanding in order to maintain a critical community. We do co-teaching and team teaching as part of our active facilitation process for collective learning. A lack of attention to oppressive comments, a denial of systematic operations of power or a dismissal of the varied feelings would have been potentially detrimental to the critical community that had been thus far established. In other words, I strive to model artful facilitation and encourage students to engage in it with one another. Particularly with students who have taken classes with me previously, I observe in them the practice of engaging in artful dialogue that sometimes centres them as facilitators. Dynamic facilitation is focused on how to help students become future team-players, change agents and caring colleagues who can help create change within the academic community

(Bettez 2008; Nichols 2004). We should invest in artful facilitation skills for students by supporting them on how to create powerful and dynamic facilitation environments. In this way, they may become future teachers competent in creating critical communities in their respective schools.

STRATEGIES FOR CREATING COLLECTIVE LEARNING CONVERSATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

Bettez (2008) and Hooks (2003) postulate that striving to foster an outside-the-classroom critical community is particularly difficult, given that most of us are already overworked, overwhelmed, stressed, and strapped for time. Therefore, the authors mention that creating community awareness outside the classroom often falls by the wayside. I have been as engaged and explicit about helping Economics Education students create informal as well as formal critical communities that extend beyond the classroom. In the next paragraph, strategies are recommended for creating collective learning spaces within and beyond the classroom.

Informal critical communities' strategies included conversations between colleagues, discussions and reflections about teaching and learning, phone calls to critical readers, check-ins with peers, collegial conversations on critical challenging community issues and academic networking at conferences. In addition to informal critical communities, formal critical communities can emerge from the classroom. Formal critical communities include establishing a tutors' forum for critical engagement; critical and transformative practices in professional learning communities; the establishment of a critical friends group; critical reading groups; collaborative inquiry writing; constructing critical literature review groups; working with groups on panel presentations; enhancing supervisor-student relationships; creating a community of learners through internet-based collectives and social networking tools like Facebook; Twitter, e-mail; audio conferencing; and using blogs to enhance critical reflection.

In summation, strategies are provided for building creative learning spaces within and beyond the classroom. I believe we have the power to serve as role models for how to build critical and creative learning communities in our class-

rooms and beyond. This can occur through modelling and facilitating community building in the classroom. Those community-building skills, such as listening carefully to others; speaking to others in ways that promote understanding; allowing our perspectives to be changed; and being a team-player in collaborative group work can be carried over outside the classroom into purposeful interactions with others. Utilising student voices and critically self-reflecting on my experience as an academic, I have attempted to demonstrate why we need to help our students foster critical communities and I offer some ideas on how to begin formulating critical communities within and beyond the classroom.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What I have attempted to do in this paper is frame each of these practices with a focus on how they can be used to promote critical communities. Building critical learning “spaces” is one of the most important and least discussed aspects of academic work. Without community we will not be sustained as we engage in this socially isolating, intellectually challenging, world-view expanding, and emotionally demanding profession. The ideas I provided here speak to promoting pedagogical practices in general: incorporating students as partners at all levels of the process of teaching and learning; utilising creative activities in the classroom that promote collaboration and critical thought; teaching with compassion; encouraging students to acknowledge the connection between emotion and intellect; and conscientiously facilitating discussions that urge students to critically self-reflect on their experiences, and be responsible for acting compassionately with their peers.

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