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Creating Communities Virtually: Educators' Cross-Cultural and Multidisciplinary Reflections of Teaching During COVID-19

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As a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, personal relationships and professional communities were instantaneously transformed and thrust into virtual and hybrid settings. In light of current events, amongst the many strains on people's daily lives, teachers and teacher educators have worked tirelessly to create meaningful educational opportunities for their students. We are two educators at a predominantly White institution in the midwestern United States who explore the similarities and differences between our personal experiences teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We collaborated as part of a social justice-oriented research project and reading group early in their doctorate programs at Purdue University. While the research project has ended, we have found opportunities to continue our ongoing dialogue through student organizations and informal, weekly writing groups. Inspired by the call to amplify our voices as graduate student educators, who experience being both empowered and powerless, we decided to turn our regular discussions and conversations into a systematic reflection. We wanted to capture our unique personal experiences working with prospective teachers in multicultural- and social justice-focused courses and share our reflections from ongoing conversations about our pedagogical practices. Since the pandemic forced educators into silos, we felt the need to reflect on our multidisciplinary teaching practices. Our reflections showcase three major themes: a juxtaposition between

power and powerlessness, equitable learning, and pandemic communities.

Personal Backgrounds and Teaching Contexts: Personal and Teaching Reflections

During one of our regular check-ins, we shared how COVID-19 was impacting us and our teaching responsibilities. As part of our ongoing discussions, we decided to begin journaling using the Pomodoro technique (Cirillo, 2018) and sharing more about our experiences to investigate the ways the global pandemic has transformed our personal, professional, and academic lives. In three, one-hour journaling sessions, which were broken down in 25-minute journaling segments and subsequent 25-minute Zoom debrief conversations, we identified three key themes: (a) experiencing power and powerlessness, (b) caring for and adapting to the needs of our undergraduate students, and (c) developing a community within our virtual and hybrid instructional spaces.

Theme 1: Power and Powerlessness

In our roles as graduate students and teaching assistants over the course of last year, we have repeatedly experienced feelings of powerlessness. Like the rest of the world, due to the global pandemic, our personal lives were thrown into disarray from canceled weddings (i.e., Lolkus), to tripled expenses for required flights to update visas (i.e., Chhikara), and also impacted our professional and academic commitments. As students in our own graduate classes, we have missed out on opportunities for collaborating with our peers due to time differences since we weathered the pandemic in our respective home countries. We have also been held to inequitable productivity standards during

uncertain times, especially due to our different student and legal status (i.e., domestic versus international student). As a domestic student, Lolkus had more access to peers through simple things, like being in the same time zone as professors and peers, while Chhikara would have had to meet at 2 a.m. local time to join research and class meetings while weathering the pandemic from her home country. Even with assistance from supportive advisors, like many graduate students, the productivity expectations (e.g., preliminary exams, publications, conference proposals) did not yield. These missed opportunities and regular stressors seemed to compound themselves given the duration of the pandemic. These examples underscore the challenges faced by international students while apart from their academic community. We recognize the missed opportunities and ongoing informal professional development that results from pre/post class conversations with peers and instructors, or even side conversations that spark potential research ideas and instructional strategies.

As teaching assistants, we have at times been empowered, and in the face of the pandemic and higher education administration, powerless. As educators teaching social justice-focused courses, issues of power and powerlessness, privilege, and disadvantage are at the forefront of our teaching. We also understand that the systemic inequities for people of different races, social classes, genders, and nationalities have been exacerbated through increased susceptibility to severe health risks of the virus (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021b), and the likelihood of losing jobs or leaving the workforce (Josephson et al., 2021; UN Women, 2020). These dramatic experiences have been felt in the rise in social, economic, and cultural crises. Similarly, we found ourselves in disparate geographical

locations during the pandemic, and our location ultimately influenced the power we held in the teaching and learning process. In the journal reflection below, Chhikara shared her attempt to make sense of her learning experiences as a graduate student and as an educator:

I found it difficult to juggle between personal and work commitments as I was beginning to learn the ropes of a new relationship, while simultaneously staying up-to-speed with planning, grading, and reflecting on my teaching and making progress on my preliminary exams. Due to COVID-19, being away from spaces where free dialogue about theoretical and research ideas transpired, I often forget to speak and communicate in academic English.

The pandemic revealed the unpredictable nature of how power plays out through the availability and/or lack of resources. Chhikara reflected on how teaching and learning were impacted by power, or lack thereof:

As an international graduate student, I live on a shoestring budget and found it difficult to manage my finances in two countries as I could not put a hold on paying my living expenses in the US while also supporting myself in India. To top it all off, on the pretext of running repatriation flights, flight carriers were charging three times the original cost of plane tickets to fly back to the US. I was in severe panic when I learnt about the ICE guidelines and the fear of not going back to the US and completing my graduate studies put added financial pressure on me and my partner.

We also discussed the need to relinquish power to accommodate for the myriad

changes that our students and we were experiencing together. In this journal entry, Lolkus discussed the ways in which he made accommodations to cater to his students' needs:

My personal preference during the pandemic was to meet 100% synchronously via Zoom given our small class sizes to minimize our exposure to COVID-19. However, through negotiation with the rest of the teaching team and our students, we agreed to meet face-to-face as long as community spread, and campus positivity rates are remaining below 5%. Students were asking for more in-person courses, and I can't blame them. Technology is notorious for cutting out during our lessons. Yesterday, campus Wi-Fi cut out for the first 20 minutes of our class, so no students could use their computers or login to university sponsored sites since our two-factor authentication was down. This made sharing their homework from the previous class impossible.

Here, Lolkus acknowledged his privilege as a White male in a White male dominated institution to exercise his ability to negotiate his preferred teaching format. Despite his perceived power, he was also positioned as a graduate student with less power. This serves as one example of the delicate dance we are engaged in as we balance our identities as students and educators, especially during the global pandemic. Furthermore, the pandemic has disproportionately impacted poor communities and communities of color (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021a) and increased the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) owed to these communities.

Theme 2: Adapting and Caring

Common within each of our reflections and conversations was how we adapted to the learning environment and demonstrated care (Noddings, 2015) for our students in new ways in response to the pandemic. Chhikara recognized the immediacy of her new challenges when her courses were thrust into a virtual format:

The teaching experience shifted dramatically as soon as we went into the virtual format. The approach to teaching changed from engaging the students and thinking about how the content would help students develop multicultural knowledge, skills, and action, to just getting through the semester and ensuring that students were doing the bare minimum to get their grades. The classroom engagement and attendance requirement changed to participating in online discussion forums, at least twice but that is not sufficient to unpack the complexity of the concepts and sociological processes involved in multicultural education. The way we created the community was also different. In previous semesters I spent a considerable amount of time during class to build a sense of community and started with an icebreaker or community building activity. As the semester progressed, students became more open about sharing personal stories and incidents related to the content. However, in the online setting especially in the Spring, it was difficult to maintain the sense of community and in the Fall, students were dwindling in the middle of the semester for various reasons.

Here, Chhikara noted the drastic shift in her mindset from supporting rich and engaging classroom discourse by first ensuring that

students' basic academic needs were met. In line with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, she felt that without developing a sense of community and being cared for in this time, students were unlikely to engage in rich dialogue. Chhikara's challenges to develop and curate a community that was thrust online were shared by Lolkus. He also reflected on his own challenges for ensuring students had equitable opportunities in the classroom related to maintaining a balance of supporting each students' needs and deadlines that also promoted a healthy work schedule. Specifically:

So many students ended up turning in assignments at different times due to constraints around COVID-19 that it was hard for me to keep up with what was due when. This feels like a bit of a lesson learned on how to negotiate with my students about course design. Obviously, we spoke about things other than due dates—that's not co-constructing a course—we incorporated what students felt was most important for them as aspiring teachers and how to incorporate those ideas to existing assignments or retool assignments so as to provide them the practice they feel would set them up for success in their field placements. It's almost like, out of the chaos, I'm learning how to facilitate conversations with students to negotiate their learning trajectories and individualize their instruction more effectively than I was able to before.

Lolkus also reflected on what he hopes to continue improving in his instruction, that is, more effectively engaging and integrating students' opinions and ideas into curricular documents through ongoing negotiation. As with many teaching endeavors, Lolkus's process was non-linear and, at times, messy. Delivering equitable instruction remained at

the forefront of our pedagogical practices during the pandemic as we confronted challenges with maintaining our community in virtual settings.

Theme 3: Pandemic Communities

One of the major themes that surfaced in our conversations was the stark difference between the opportunities to create communities virtually compared to face-to-face classes. Social justice is enacted in the spaces and places we occupy, but due to a fear of surveillance (e.g., Foucault, 1979) always hanging over virtual interactions, authentic and organic connections are hard to create. We found the lack of authentic engagement in virtual settings as one of the greatest barriers to creating a sense of community. In the entry below, Chhikara reflected on the challenges she faced to discuss issues of social justice and multiculturalism within virtual settings:

I work to demonstrate respect for the profound potential in each of my students as I try to embody a *Soka* (value-creating) perspective in my teaching whose central goal is to focus on the happiness of the learner (Ikeda, 2010). *Soka* is a neologism of *kachi* to create *sozo* value. Specifically, for multiculturalism and education, I hope that students can challenge their assumptive beliefs and thoughts about marginalized communities and examine the impact of race, class, gender, and social group identities on teaching and learning. As a person of color teaching multiculturalism to predominantly White students, my positionality can be perceived as an attack on the cultural and social beliefs of my students. So, I always try to emphasize that the objective of the class is not to change students' opinions, but to encourage

them to think critically about the social-power structures entrenched in the social fabric.

Communities built in classrooms are incumbent on a sense of relationality and shared responsibility for learning (Rovai, 2002). However, despite Chhikara's goals toward creating and embodying a *Soka* perspective during virtual learning, it was harder to achieve those goals in an asynchronous setting. Sometimes, the virtual format resulted in superficial conversations.

In the reflection below, Lolkus discusses the difficulty of creating personal relationships with students virtually where informal interactions seemed forced and unnatural:

Pre-pandemic, I tried to get to know my students, but at a distance. Small things about their interests and experiences, connect them to class, their futures, etc. Now, I'm invited into their homes for class. Their pets and siblings are incorporated in our lessons. I'm finding myself in meetings and classes just building in time to chat with folks, wanting to hear how they are. Really, we are just welcoming each other into our own spaces.

Across these two reflections, we noticed both the inherent relationships and bonding that occurred as a result of a shared challenge (i.e., COVID-19), and also the strain on our traditionally student-centered classroom discussions.

Conclusion

Throughout our reflections, we noted how our attempts to develop co-constructed classroom communities were, in fact, guided by our attempts to adapt our teaching practices and care for our students. In

response to novel situations, such as the pandemic, we are reminded that educators should demonstrate care for their students by developing a community in their classrooms, engaging students in collaborative discussions, and enlisting students in the planning and assessment processes.

Based on our experiences, we find it is valuable to involve students in the decision-making processes that shape their hybrid and virtual learning experiences. While this sometimes resulted in greater relationship-building opportunities, we at times felt that some students were lost in the digital void. As we progress on our teaching journeys during the pandemic, we continue to reflect on and take action toward developing stronger relationships with students and communities in our instructional spaces.

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