Emancipatory Social Work Education: Why it is so difficult to practise instead of preach

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the challenges of avoiding "expertism" when implementing emancipatory approaches to social work practice and education. It interrogates the experiences of the author in both contexts, to identify key factors that support emancipatory practice. It notes the default orientation of the author to "expert" role, and the factors that make challenging this more or less difficult. It concludes that a range of structural and cultural forces impact significantly on teaching from an emancipatory perspective. These factors include the employment context of the teacher and the culture of the staff team. The idea of a "mythical norm" is used to trace maps of discrimination that may highlight how oppressive dynamics may play out within universities. The paper concludes that critical reflection and creative approaches assist in implementing an emancipatory approach to teaching practice.

Keywords: *Oppression; Emancipatory; Critical reflection; Auto-ethnographic, Social work teaching*

INTRODUCTION

When one takes up a new role, there is often a great temptation to present oneself as an "expert". However, for those seeking to practise in an emancipatory way, this temptation is to be resisted. This piece examines my experiences, both as a practitioner and a teacher, as I sought to develop my own *emancipatory* approaches in both contexts. I interrogate my experiences and privilege through this process and identify structural and cultural barriers to this practice.

Throughout this piece I have used the language of "emancipatory" practice in relation to both my social work and teaching practice. This language indicates a focus on structural issues in relation to social problems. In social work this perspective is also referred to as a "critical" perspective or an "anti-oppressive perspective" and draws on earlier structural and feminist perspectives when the focus was predominantly on class or gender respectively (Mullaly, 2010). In education it is referred to as various things such as "democratic pedagogies" or "teaching for social justice". I have chosen the term "emancipatory" for its capacity to cross disciplinary boundaries and also because the language seems to most embody that which I strive to build.

There are some contradictions imbedded in this piece. The first is that the method undertaken in analysing my practice, that is *self-reflection*, is inherently one where I predominantly have drawn on my own voice, and not the perspectives of others. This in itself may reinforce dynamics of the practitioner's voice being privileged. The second is that my sources for reflection predominantly draw on authors with whose material I am most familiar and have been most readily able to source, which is likely to amplify voices of the dominant culture, rather than a range of other, diverse, authors who are less well known.

MY EARLY FOUNDATION STORY

When I was at high school, my clear vision of what I wanted to do was to "help people". It was a role I had already begun to take up in my peer group, and was based on an assumption that I had much I could "give" to people. There were already class overtones to this role – I was from a rather middle-class-identifying and -behaving family, and many of my peers were from much more disadvantaged backgrounds. I also had very firm spiritual convictions in the form of fundamentalist Christian beliefs and consequently I believed I had "the answers" that I needed to impart to others.

I left my small coastal town and enrolled in a social work degree to give me the "piece of paper" that would give me the legitimacy to "help" people. Participating in the Bachelor of Arts program at a major Melbourne university exposed me to a range of people and thinking that had been a long way outside the realm of my own experience. I experienced my first invitations to listen to other perspectives and worldviews, and other conceptualisations of what it might mean to help. Nonetheless, the school of social work I trained in was a traditionalist one. I found little in the course that challenged my base assumption that I would be a person of knowledge and skills who would help others. When I was exposed to some more radical perspectives in the course, I was not able to integrate them into my thinking, and they were rejected as outside my frame.

When I graduated, I had no critical consciousness about my own privilege. I had yet to be able to unpack the ways that class and culture had privileged my own perspective (Goodman, 2010; McIntosh, 1989). I was offered, and took, a social work job in a disadvantaged area of Melbourne. Subconsciously, I believed my role was to be the expert to whom people would come to have their problems solved. For many of my clients it also appeared that they looked to the "privileged" one to provide answers. For a time I comfortably played that role.

MOVING TOWARDS AN EMANCIPATORY PERSPECTIVE

This role of expert did not remain comfortable for long. The following are the factors I believe assisted me to move towards emancipatory practice.

Critical reflection and welcoming risk

In this workplace, the manager of the small agency and I would often reflect about our experiences at the end of the day. This grew into a regular routine of critical reflection where we analysed both our own practice and the social context of that practice. I was invited to reflect about my own practice in a way that did not challenge my competence – it was safe to take risks, to make mistakes, and to learn from them. Through this process it became clear to me that so much of what we responded to in our work on an individual level had structural causes. For example, while people's unemployment was an "issue", it clearly stemmed from the recent restructuring of the Australian manufacturing industry which had led to a rapid loss of employment in the area. While much of the political discourse appeared to blame people for their own unemployment, we focused our attention on the structural causes of it. This led to a shift from our interventions predominantly seeking to change the individual, to those that predominantly sought to change our society. This is the core foundation of emancipatory social work.

Interrogation of my role

Relatively early in my practice, our organisation was invited to lead a campaign to challenge a proposal for a new poker machine venue in the local shopping centre. I took up the key role with gusto and we mounted a highly successful campaign that engaged a range of players and we were even successful in our immediate goal – stopping the venue from gaining approval. It was only with hindsight that I realised I had placed *myself* at the head of the campaign. I had assumed that I would lead, and that I held the best skills and resources to take on this role. This had very problematic consequences. During the campaign I gave an interview to a current affairs program and made comments that were rather patronising – and I did not even realise this until I was challenged by a community member the next day at work. I had projected my own middle-class assumptions over the community and also I had presumed to speak *for* them.

Explicitly inviting diverse voices

Over time, our organisation sought to engage a range of community voices in our thinking about the agency's role as a strategy to combat the assumption that the professionals held all the expertise. We engaged in critical reflection processes amongst people who had

previously been designated less powerful roles ("volunteer" or even "client") – and saw that they had enormous expertise about how to best serve the community.

Engagement with emancipatory ideas

Another very significant early experience was becoming a fieldwork supervisor for students undertaking their field placement. I had students from a university who worked from a framework of emancipatory social work. This exposed me to the theoretical depth of the way of working that I was experimenting with. My first students were three men, all older than me, and two from a less privileged cultural group than myself. I think this placement was an opportunity for all of us to acknowledge the role that gender and age played in our interactions – and I had to grapple with the power of my role to "pass" or "fail" them. Over the years we had another 10 students, and through the process of planning projects with them and staff of the university, I was able to understand more about the emancipatory approach to social work.

This version of social work resonated much more deeply with me. I had come to realise that there were structural causes of the problems that people faced in our community. I also realised that there was much *expertise* about how to deal with these problems amongst the community, and I began to learn from people around me about how to survive in the area.

TRANSITION TO EDUCATOR

I can still remember my first time teaching in a social work classroom. I was invited by a lecturer/mentor from a social work school with an emancipatory focus to share with a community development class some of the work I was doing. It was a small group of students, who were all sitting in a circle. I remember the environment feeling "co-created" by the teacher and students, with the teacher giving plenty of space for students to bring their knowledge and reflections into the room. In this context I felt comfortable to enter this space as a co-learner who had something to bring to the learning environment. I remember the students asking me whether I thought our gambling campaign work was community development since I seemed to be doing all the leading. I left that classroom with a buzz of excitement – I had new insights into my own practice, and the students also seemed to have new thoughts about practising community development.

In that first teaching experience it felt so easy to engage in emancipatory social work education. I was embodying that which I believed. Much of my early teaching work was similar to this – co-creating learning environments with an experienced lecturer and small groups of students. I had some wonderful teaching mentors, and in working with them I could begin to integrate some of my emancipatory ideas into my teaching.

REVERTING BACK TO "EXPERT"

Within two years of this first experience, teaching became my main work. I taught at multiple universities, and moved from guest lecturer, to a sessional tutor, and then not so long after this, as a subject coordinator. As I was given roles of increased responsibility, I realised that my approach to teaching quickly seemed to replicate my early work as a social worker. I was thrown into a role about which I knew relatively little, and the role

invited me to be expert. The less secure I felt, the less I allowed myself to take the risk of a co-created process, and instead felt that I needed to assert my knowledge.

I was also given increased responsibilities for students – including whether they passed or failed certain subjects. This power clearly reflected itself in relationships with students. Often the dominant factor in the relationship was that I was the person who judged their performance rather than one who facilitated a learning environment. As I look back I see a picture of myself as a relatively young, middle-class woman, standing in front of a group of students who, predominantly, had multiple experiences of disadvantage and discrimination. I prepared lectures with information that I felt only moderately comfortable about my grasp of, and I felt it was my responsibility to pass on this knowledge. As I stood to teach "emancipatory social work" I knew that the construct of the teaching environment did not make sense. I did not feel that I practised what I preached but there never seemed to be the time or space to explore another approach.

I think the more sophisticated analysis of my story is that, as I taught, I oscillated between these two ways of teaching practice. When I was tired or stressed or felt time pressured, I found it easy to revert to the "teacher as expert" mode. In other circumstances I was much more likely to practise in an emancipatory style. In order to understand more fully why I found it difficult to consistently implement my emancipatory aims, I have identified and interrogated the following factors influencing my teaching.

CONFRONTING MY OWN POWER AS TEACHER

One of the challenges in teaching is the inherent power dynamic between a student and a teacher. The teacher is both the one who constructs the narrative of the classroom, and who makes the decisions about whether the student passes or fails. This is why it is seen that education so often replicates oppression within our society (Freire, 1970). The first step to me being able to engage in a more emancipatory process would be to try and challenge these dichotomous roles, and shift to a place where I am a facilitator of process, and a co-learner with students.

To consider a structural example, one of the social work courses I taught had received considerable pressure from the university to increase its student numbers to aid efficiency or the course would be withdrawn. Class sizes got larger, and it became more challenging to engage individual students. I found myself meeting over a 100 new students each semester, and not being able to even remember all their names. Since I was constantly teaching new subjects, I felt that I was constantly playing "catch up" while trying to ensure I knew all the material the students were expected to learn. I was paid only for teaching the subject, not learning the material myself. I found that the less time I had to prepare, and the more heavy the workload, the easier it always was to return to the default position of a didactic teaching style.

The structure of university classes appears to be shaped around the "banking" method of education – with the assumption that the role of the teachers is to "deposit" information into students (Freire, 1970; Micheletti, 2010). The teaching funding formula our classes

were based around was a lecture to a large number of students, and a tutorial to a smaller (but still relatively large) group. Unlike my example of social work practice, where taking risks was encouraged and making mistakes was expected, universities seemed to be particularly risk-averse environments. I felt pressure from the universities to guard against student complaints, try to get greater student throughput, to ensure a high number of passes; and to get positive feedback on official university evaluations. The other structural issue that seemed to significantly impact on my practice was my employment context. As a sessional tutor there was no time for professional development or critical reflection. For me both these things are important to implementing emancipatory practice.

CULTURAL FACTORS AND THE LACK OF CRITICAL REFLECTION IN OUR GROUP

The culture of the social work team at a major workplace also changed in this period. There were some staffing changes, and there was conflict between members of the staff. I was also taking on more responsibility for subject coordination and consequently I was working much more independently. The ramification for me was that there was a loss of the feedback and reflection spaces that I had previously experienced and had come to value deeply.

One of the particular aspects of our work that I would have liked to reflect upon was difficult interactions with students. Critical reflection upon these can be an opportunity to deepen our understanding of practice. However, I do not think I ever approached conflicts in this way – I saw them as risks to be managed, rather than opportunities to learn and reflect. I think about one particular student who appeared to have ongoing complaints about the social work staff. Throughout the processes of each of her complaints, we ensured that we followed exactly the university process, and did not expose ourselves or the university to any risk. The situation was entirely constructed as a reflection of her individual pathology and we never seemed to ask questions about what else might have been present in the dynamic. What were the structural issues at play? Was racism a factor at all? Were there ways that we could work creatively with the university systems to support the student?

WAS MY LENS BLURRED BY MY OWN PRIVILEGE?

Ironically, while I was teaching about discrimination and oppression, it appeared that I did not have my eyes open to any of the ways that I may have been replicating these patterns in my own teaching practice. It seems that thorough critical reflection on practice is vital to ensure that we can "see" the dynamics that are often invisible to those who are privileged. I am predominantly privileged, and was becoming more so through my employment in an academic setting. It is most difficult for people in a privileged group to see discrimination – it is invisible to us until it is explicitly unpacked. It is uncomfortable to notice one's own privilege, as it raises challenging questions about how we are to deal with this privilege (Lorde, 1984). Foley (1999) also notes that, for people from a privileged group working in roles that are "helping" those from a less privileged group, an additional disincentive to challenge the system is that it rewards us individually. The system rewards in terms of money and status were certainly greatest for me while working in universities:

it is more difficult to "bite the hand that feeds us". It is also inevitable that we identify with a system that we are embedded within.

A particular aspect that we did not reflect about explicitly was the disparity between the identity politics of the staff team, and that of our student group. We were very proud of the diversity of our students – we had many students who were the first in their family to go to university, and many students with backgrounds of severe discrimination or violence. However, we never examined this in the context of the identity politics of the staff group. The staff group were much more privileged than the vast majority of our students, and I believe a discussion about this could have helped us significantly in building a more emancipatory framework for our practice.

While questions of ethnicity were never discussed explicitly, questions of gender certainly were. The staff team would have all identified as feminist, and there were strong analyses of these dynamics. Is it that in focusing predominantly through the lens of gender that other lenses, such as culture and class became our blind spots? Lorde (1984) suggests it is common for white privileged women to be co-opted into institutional systems as it appears they are seen as equal.

DEVELOPING MAPS OF DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICE

A model that I find very helpful in analysing my own teaching practice is what Hosken (2013a) calls "developing maps to trace discriminatory practice" (p.96). She begins with the idea of a "mythical norm" – which is a "stereotype that is perpetuated by society, against which everyone else is measured" (Lorde, 1999, cited in Hosken 2013a, p. 96). Then "the normalisation of gender, race/ethnicity and class inequality inhered via the mythical norm is institutionalised into university recruitment, enrolment, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and other policies and practices that constructs how people perform gender, race/ethnicity and class at the university" (Hosken, 2013b, p.97). The courses we teach, and the way we teach become, unconsciously, focused towards the mythical norm. To uncover this norm, one has to listen to a variety of voices. It is important, of course, to listen to students. One can also look for clues in how the system works, whose resource materials are being accessed, what the assessment tasks are and so forth. After identifying the mythical norm, one is then able to map all the ways that the system might be providing structural barriers (institutionalised discrimination) to those not meeting this norm. Finally "the map of discriminatory practices can be useful to challenge claims by dominant group members that discriminated-against group members are somehow more responsible for their own poorer life opportunities and outcomes, than those with the power to create or perpetuate discriminatory practices" (Hosken, 2013a, p. 96).

The generalised mythical norm is seen to be "white, middle-classed, heterosexual, able-bodied, urban, city dwelling, Christian acceptable, male" (Hosken, 2013a, p. 96). While it may be possible for the mythical norm of students or staff at a university to be different from this, it is not likely. It is worth exploring how this mythical norm idea is projected on both the role of student and teacher.

It is likely that the more a student diverges from the mythical norm, the harder they will have to work to translate their experiences to the teaching environment. The social work students I taught, particularly in one context, were predominantly working-class, culturally diverse, often with health or disability issues, with a range of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, and a number of them were in same-sex relationships. There were very few students who would not have experienced some form of oppression in their lives, and many students experienced multiple levels of oppression (a single Somalian woman with a disability living on a low income, for example).

INTERROGATING MY TEACHING THROUGH A MAP OF DISCRIMINATION

The map of discriminatory practice invites a thorough interrogation of all aspects of work for potential discrimination. The following are three aspects of my work which may reflect discriminatory practice.

The first part of my work that I wish to examine is assessment. The assessment tasks in social work are predominantly essays, especially in the early years of the degree. This assumes that students will have a high level of written literacy, as well as be able to engage in analysis in a specific academic format. Both these things have class-based assumptions implicit in them, as literacy is often higher in privileged groups (Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009). In my teaching I justified this as appropriate practice, as on graduation students will need to be professional social workers, and my "norm" for social work involves professionals who are highly literate. I saw it as my professional duty to safeguard this level of written expression. However, on reflection, while this is a *factor* in professional practice, I wonder whether the level of importance I placed upon it is a projection of my class. At any rate, knowing that students are more likely to come from backgrounds where written English is not their strong suit, a range of support mechanisms to support students towards competence in this area would be more appropriate. I believe that it is also necessary to ensure that assessment tasks are primarily assessing core competencies rather than written expression.

A second aspect to examine is the reading material that students are prescribed. Voices from textbooks are seen as "expert" and have a powerful role in conveying the dominant narrative (Crisp, Anderson, Orme, & Lister, 2005). Even within critical social work, the majority of the texts that were used in subjects I taught were written by white privileged men (Ife, 2008, 2013; Jones & May, 1992; Mullaly, 2010). There were also a number of key texts written (or co-written) by white women (Maidment & Egan, 2009; Kenny, 2010; O'Connor, Wilson, Setterlund, & Hughes, 2008)), which were used in the courses I taught in. However, very few textbooks utilised were written to include minority voices (the only exception I can remember is one co-written by a mental health consumer: Bland, Renouf, & Tullgren (2009). This is likely to mean the key frameworks drawn on are all white, and most are written by men. On looking at the readings that I prescribed for students, I can see a mixed bag but all subjects could have included more diverse reading sources.

I can see in my own teaching that the forms of discrimination that I discuss in class, or deliberately try to counter are the ones which most connect to my own identity politics.

I am most likely to identify gender dynamics in the classroom – the one factor in which I am part of the oppressed group. Secondly, I am likely to emphasise class – while I grew up in a middle-class family, and have many middle-class privileges, I do not identify strongly with this group. Thirdly, I am likely to use examples of heterosexist privilege because I have stories of me acting "in solidarity" with people with diverse sexual boundaries. I am least likely to find opportunities to move from an ableist perspective (field trips have included very difficult physical spaces to navigate), nor a cultural one – because racism discrimination based on my ability and racism are furthest from my own experience.

HOW DID THE MYTHICAL NORM IMPACT ON MY PRACTICE?

The idea of a mythical norm is also potentially instructive in examining the dynamic between me and the students. This norm influences both how I see myself and how I believe I *should* be, as well as how students perceive me. Reflecting on how my practice conformed to, or deviated from, this norm it is clear that I fitted it in that I was white, middle class, university educated, and had professional experience on which to draw. However, in other ways I did *not* fit this norm – I was young, not married, had no children and I was employed "sessionally" – I was not a "proper academic".

The first implication of this mythical norm is how I felt about my role. I sensed that I did not quite fit the mould I was supposed to and consequently I did not feel secure enough to locate myself in a "not knowing" place of co-learning. This is something that I need to continually challenge in my own teaching practice. The level of my own confidence seems to correlate with how emancipatory my teaching approach is. When I feel confident with my position or knowledge, then I am more likely to engage in emancipatory approaches to teaching. When I am stressed, anxious about new material to present or not confident in the style, I am more likely to revert back to teacher-as-expert. The first time I teach a subject, I am going to be more drawn to a teacher-as-expert role than the second or subsequent times. My status as a sessional tutor, who often changes subjects and has often only taught a subject once, undermines my own capacity to engage in teaching that is consistently emancipatory. There is an interesting balance here regarding competence. One must be secure enough in one's approach and knowledge of the subject area to be able to confidently create a safe and stimulating learning environment. However, to have emancipatory learning, we need to be humble enough to learn from students, and open to their expertise in guiding us.

The second way that the mythical norm of a "good teacher" would impact on the teaching relationship is the way in which students perceive me. I suspect that students reacted against the ways that they saw me embodying the mythical norm which they experienced as oppressive. I was the one setting assessment criteria and stipulating the direction of the learning in the subject. I was white and educated. However, I also suspect that what was most influential was that students identified that I did not fit the mythical norm in many ways. In fact, perhaps I fitted this norm the least throughout the staff group in social work for much of my time – I was the youngest, a woman, had the least established career, and I was not undertaking PhD study.

ALLOWING SPACE FOR DISSENT

I think my "difference" particularly played out in the way that dissent was expressed in classrooms where I was the teacher. Often in my class there was a lot of dissent expressed, not only regarding the classes I was teaching, but about other subjects or the course more broadly. I assumed that the dissent expressed was a factor of my own inadequacies. I did not mind this particularly – I knew I had much to learn about being a good teacher, and so I was happy to hear criticisms and suggestions for change. However, when I indicated to students that, as a sessional teacher I did not have any power to deal with many of their concerns, I was surprised at their response. Students indicated that they had not brought their concerns into the classroom so I could *fix* them, but that they identified this space as one where dissent was invited and welcome, and that there was space to explore these concerns.

Allowing spaces for dissent in the classroom often caused tension in the broader staff team. I guess any concerns expressed by people of an oppressed group to a dominant group are likely to arouse tension as there is agitation for change to occur. However, as a sessional, this was always a precarious role for me, and one I was not necessarily skilled in managing. There was one particular instance when I encouraged students to express their dissatisfaction, but this was done in a way that was hurtful to the teacher involved. The role of the teacher might be to support, not only the expression of dissent, but also to provide opportunities for reflection about the ways to do this that are most likely to produce the best result.

HOW I SOUGHT TO DELIBERATELY BECOME MORE EMANCIPATORY IN MY PRACTICE

Having found myself engaging in practices that I was not comfortable with, I realised that to change my own style towards being consistently emancipatory would need some deliberate effort. I began studying the Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Education (GCTE) in my own time to provide a space to both reflect upon my teaching, and to improve it. This was helpful in a number of ways. First, I had structured time to reflect about teaching. Second, I was able to use this time to read some of the theoretical material about teaching philosophy that I wanted to be grounded in. Finally, I was given practical strategies for engaging students in more participatory ways.

Soon after beginning studying the GCTE I was asked to coordinate a subject in which I did not have any inherent expertise. This felt like a clear opportunity to approach my work differently, to structure my work so that I could better "practise what I preached". The first thing I did was to ask for an additional number of hours to be included in my contract before the start of semester, so I could plan for the subject well. With those hours I sought out a range of reading materials and guest lecturers from a variety of different perspectives, including consumers and people with different cultural understandings of health and mental health. I structured the first two sessions, which I was facilitating, so that they were "student led". The first class included a range of small group concept mapping. The second week we focused on expert groups, also known as "the jigsaw" (Aronson & Patnoe, 2011) – where students become experts in a particular aspect of a course, and teach their student

colleagues. Through the use of these strategies I was able to move into the role of facilitator of a learning process, rather than the expert who shared all the knowledge. Students became much more active learners in this class. Interestingly I found the students were initially somewhat uncomfortable with this change of role and challenged my lack of specific and overall knowledge of the subject – it seems that they were more comfortable with an "all knowing expert". However, there was something that was clearly liberating for students as I was able to support them to gain and share knowledge.

In a more general sense I also worked to have more of a dialogical approach in my teaching. A dialogical approach is one where it is assumed that the teaching happens in dialogue of different ideas (Freire, 1970). I resisted the temptation to answer every question that was posed to me in a classroom with a specific and discrete response. I practised redirecting questions to the student group. I would often invite more senior students into a class to share their experiences and ideas with students.

Another strategy for engaging in dialogical approaches was to have electronic discussion boards as a key part of a particular unit. I posed a range of questions on the discussion boards and students responded to these questions, as well as other students' posts. Posting comments on the bulletin board was compulsory. Part-way through the subject I realised that students were spending a lot of time in these online dialogues, even though their semesters were very busy. I noticed that in these posts students were much more likely to assert their own knowledge than when they were in the classroom. I also noticed that there were a greater range and depth of comments from international students, and I wondered whether being able to respond in their own time made the dialogue more accessible to students for whom English was an additional language. It appeared the students valued this space and it added a different dimension to their learning. I concluded that these online spaces were more free of interference from the teacher, were done in the students' own time (and with plenty of time for reflection in between if needed) and therefore brought about a different type of discussion than in the classroom. In response to this, I thought that one way to truly value this dialogue was to count this time as being equally important as class time. Since students were indicating that their timetable was over-full and they were stressed, in dialogue with students I cancelled two classes and the online discussions were given as credit for this engagement.

I was asked to teach a subject which had recently had its class time doubled for bureaucratic reasons, and therefore there was more time than fixed content of the subject. Taking the opportunity, I sought to structure the class as a democratic classroom where students were able to contribute to the content and structure of their own learning. My first experiment with this subject was to invite a group decision-making process about who would be in the first tutorial (most popular), and who would be in the second. This process attempted to share the power amongst the students, and it demonstrated power dynamics within the student group that were previously "controlled" by the environment. This class seemed to be "difficult" because there were lots of direct challenges in the classroom. However, I believed students were experimenting with their own power in the group, and had the space to discuss the ways that power was playing out in the classroom.

DISCUSSING THE POWER DYNAMICS IN A CLASS

One practice that I think supports emancipatory teaching is to discuss the power dynamics in a group. I often deconstruct the role of the teacher, and talk about the tension I feel between recognising the structural place of assessments, and wanting my role to primarily be in facilitating learning rather than assessment. I also like to expose other power dynamics. In one of my classes there were a number of African Australian students, but they participated very little in class discussions. Then one day an African Australian student gave a class presentation, focusing on the African migrant experience. The discussion was dominated (appropriately) by the African Australian students. At the end of the class I noted the difference in this dynamic and invited the students to think about why that was. I often make note if there is an "odd student out" in terms of gender or culture or religion and I noted here that it was very important for the group to include their perspectives.

One of the most significant elements of implementing emancipatory education is to recognise that learning is a co-created process. Hytten and Adkins (2001, p. 448) state, "As members of the dominant culture, we cannot construct socially just educational practices alone; it is arrogant and preposterous to think we can" (cited in Warren, 2011, p.140). If the voices of the oppressed are not included, then discrimination is bound to continue – as the dominant members of society (in this case academics) will continue to implement practice based on their blind spots and the institutionalised discrimination that we inevitably imbibe. The other aspect of this is to acknowledge the wisdom of post-structural perspectives that acknowledge that power is fluid and can be taken up (or not taken up) by members of an oppressed group. One of my favourite early ideas as a social worker was that we cannot empower others, but we can be one part of an empowerment process (Ife, 1997). Those who seek emancipation who are closer to the mythical norm can only work towards supporting or co-creating the environments for this to be facilitated – students, clients and/or minority group members may choose to take up this power in the ways envisaged, or in other ways not necessarily visible or apparent to those who experience power.

ENGAGING IN STRUCTURES

Structurally there are strategies that can be undertaken to support more emancipatory teaching practices. There were a number of things that other colleagues and I advocated for without success: smaller class sizes and co-teaching subjects, for example.

There was a very significant structural strategy that was undertaken in one of the schools of social work I was present in, though I was not personally involved in implementing it. In staff meetings it was recognised that we had an increased number of students who were entering our course after studying at private training colleges. These students often had lower levels of written English literacy and struggled to pass the assessment requirements. The social work staff engaged with learning support and worked to provide literacy support for specific subjects early on in the degree – where it was first noticed that students had a problem. This is a much better framework than one that assesses students as "good enough" or not. Instead it recognises a common problem that students face, and seeks to implement a strategy that responds structurally.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is clear from my own experience that, if I wish to live in ways that challenge rather than replicate oppression, then I need to be attentive to the structural, cultural and individual factors impacting on my teaching, and to be responsive at all three levels. First, I need to recognise my own privilege in any situation, and challenge it. I need to be humble about my own knowledge, and acknowledge my own blind spots. I know that there will be internal resistance to this, as recognising both one's privilege and limitations is challenging and uncomfortable. Second, I need to acknowledge that many systems inherently replicate oppression, and I need to work to recognise these structural barriers, and challenge them the best I am able to from my position within the structures. Third, I need to recognise that there are a range of cultural aspects within a workplace that can make this easier – colleagues to reflect with, an environment that welcomes risk and new ideas and that allows for deliberate processes of reflection. I am also increasingly likely to engage in education that is closer to the emancipatory teaching processes when I am feeling comfortable in both my role and with the material I am teaching. Very practically, I need to ensure I seek out teaching tools that reflect a more participatory classroom, particularly ones that support students to learn from one another. Finally I think we need to be brave enough to have conversations about the dynamics of oppression – for only in being honest about these dynamics can we challenge them.

Note: Jessica is now working in advocacy for Palestinian human rights.

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