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EMERGENCE AND COMPASSION:

A Reflection on Interpersonal Priorities and Strategies within Collaborative Settings

Chanel Beebe (*Engineering Education and Industrial Engineering*)

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, **Chanel Beebe** is a creative artist, writer, and educator who designs, implements, and conducts research on STEAM programming. Chanel's current projects investigate how nonengineers at various STEAM programming sites make sense of their experience and exhibit evidence of systemic thinking. Chanel has a strong passion for nourishing the critical and social consciousness of youth and is the founder and CEO of a research and design firm that focuses on social and educational equity (Beebe Arts LLC). Within this role, she provides consulting, research, and various forms of media design to individuals, community groups, institutions, and corporations.

In 2021, Chanel will graduate with both a master's degree in Industrial Engineering and a PhD in Engineering Education and plans to continue to study socially situated design and learning experiences. As a growing "sociotechnical activist," Chanel seeks to blend her values of equity, health, and sustainability with her formal training as an industrial engineer. Ultimately, Chanel hopes her contributions will transform the experience of social reform and well-being for historically disenfranchised people. More of Chanel's work and progress can be found at ChanelBeebe.com.

INTRODUCTION

Issues of equity and inclusion are wicked problems by necessity. The nature of work with and for humans and communities requires intentional relationship building that can be rife with complexities, foibles, discomfort, and learning. As scholars, researchers, practitioners, educators, and students, we carry a multitude of identities and dispositions that make collaborative work and change-making a messy and potentially emotional journey. Thus, many groups that find themselves on this journey often struggle to develop harmonious or impactful lasting relationships and often create toxic or harmful working environments for those who are the most marginalized or have the least power. The goal of this work is to provide a reflection on a specific instance of collaborative work and the associated journey in order to provide recommendations for more thoughtful people-centered

engagement. Hopefully this reflection inspires those of us who work collaboratively to design experiences and artifacts in a way that marginalizes less and emerges more. In this light, we can co-create solutions and interventions with the very people we seek to serve.

In order to make this reflection useful, this work is broken down into five parts. The first section focuses on my journey to finding the collaborative group—as my background and disposition most certainly affected my experience within the group. The second section explores the collaborative group itself—referred to in this work as Murmurations. The third section, "Community Impact," provides more context for the Murmurations group by reflecting on the inner workings/priorities of the group and how community was established within the group. The fourth section, "Author Impact," describes my personal experience within the Murmurations community

and an artifact of the group—the *Murmurations* journal. The final section summarizes the experience of working with the Murmurations group and potential implications for others interested in doing work with humans across lines of difference.

Before exploring my journey to and lessons from this collaborative group work, I will first outline what this group is and what engagement with this group looks like. For the past year and some change, I've been working with this group of engineering educators with a lot of privilege and influence who were all interested in addressing issues of inequity in education on both big and tiny systems. Initially, it was a daunting task. Though the intentions were seemingly perfect, the identities in our shared spaces still had more social power than mine (racially, professionally, and seemingly intellectually). I persisted in e-mail threads, video calls, and in person for one major reason—folks in this group seemed to learn from our interactions. Though I was frequently contributing different variations of the same perspective, each interaction brought with it an evolved sense of understanding and empathy on both sides.

As we contemplated and practiced various emergent strategies to address the issues we saw in our institutions and world, we came up with many ideas to tangibly affect change—one of which was an open access but still peer-reviewed journal that made space for more than academics to publish and discuss issues of equity and related work. This journal, we imagined, would somehow publish articles, poetry, videos, graphics, and more and would completely change the typical review process to be more about reflection and less about gatekeeping. We brainstormed a process in which creators would submit to a facilitator who would only check for scope and then pass the artifact to a team of reflectors. These reflectors would digest the piece and reflect with their identities intact (not as anonymous bodies behind a screen). The coolest part about our idea, in my opinion, is that the reflection of the reflectors and the creator's response to those reflections would become part of the publication—thereby making space for public dialogue that can be archived and reflected on in the future. With this system in mind, we set out to find the technology to support such an interface and an inaugural team of reflectors and creators.

Though I knew I wanted to be a creator and reflector, I also knew I wanted to push myself to be as supportive of this process as possible in a way that taught me things I didn't already know. So, I volunteered to serve as an apprentice to the faculty member who would be the

editor (facilitator). Over time, I realized that such a role was a bigger deal than I had imagined. Because of the spirit of the editor and our team, my input was incredibly influential and I found myself, without a PhD, making editor-like decisions and points of conversation. The sense of power and expertise I was able to gain from this engagement was truly transformational to my identities and was a turning point in my journey.

MY JOURNEY TO THIS COLLABORATIVE GROUP

When I joined Engineering Education in 2016, it became apparent to me that my passions for community engagement and creativity could be leveraged to create a unique experience of research and practice. Though I initially considered separating my art and community relations from my research, it quickly became impossible as I learned that my motivations and passions for research were deeply rooted in my creativity and concerns for communities. By my second year, everyone in my department who had interacted with me for longer than five minutes knew I was an artist and poet with an engineering degree who had a passion for bringing in community perspectives whenever possible.

This reputation came with perks. I was often asked to speak at campus functions and was often the recipient of any and all announcements related to the arts or community engagements. So, when a group of researchers based in California, who had decided to start a journal related to education that prioritized equity and beauty, reached out to a professor within my department, she forwarded the opportunity to me with no hesitation.

Though I could not articulate it well at the time, I was skeptical of working with groups of researchers with deep histories within the academy. From my own experience of building relationships within and around the academy, I found relationship building to be a tense journey of negotiating conflicting values. I valued relationship, simplicity, and accessibility and the academics I usually worked with valued impact, rigor, and "diversity." Though I did not disagree with the values most academics had, there was always, in my opinion, groundwork of relationships to be laid before outcomes and judgments of impact or rigor could be made. Even further, I was deeply concerned with the accessibility of the projects academics typically invited me to participate in. Though the projects were usually well intended, there were many silent assumptions made that would dictate who could participate and engage with the suggested projects. With all these concerns in mind, I responded

to the opportunity forwarded to me by that professor and opted to at least meet with this group once to see what they had in mind. (After all, their annual convening was in beautiful San Jose, California.) Worst case scenario, I rationalized, even if it was more of the same misalignment of values, I would at least be processing it somewhere warm.

THE COLLABORATIVE GROUP: MURMURATIONS

After expressing interest in their annual convening, I learned more specifics about the group of academics and their passion for educational equity. To my surprise, the group was made up of more than academics. Though they were all educators in some right, some were middle school and high school teachers, and some were facilitators of informal dialogues. Though they were all concerned about the role of institutions in affecting equity, their convening was more to leverage privilege within and around the academy than to act on behalf of the academy. Within this vein, I learned that the group had been convening for the past three years to brainstorm solutions to inequities in education. They had concerns similar to mine with regard to the relationship between the academy and the community and the silent messages about access and power that these relationships sent. Since having these conversations, they decided that something needed to be done to mend relations between the academy and its community and had opted to use their institutional privileges to start an open source and access journal that would highlight the work of anyone working toward educational equity. They decided to call themselves and this journal *Murmurations* as that name would mimic the flight patterns of individual entries with common goals. Beyond the journal, the group decided that continuous community building would function as its larger purpose—which led to a continuous and gradual influx of new members and directions of action. The remainder of this work will focus primarily on the journal—though others evolved from this group as well.

What initially struck me the most about interacting with this group is that each member had their own understanding of what the group and journal was for. Even more odd was that they did not require everyone who came to the convening to be on board with the journal. Though they were very clear in inviting newcomers to participate, they made space for conversations and brainstorming about solutions other than the journal. This required flexibility on the part of the organizers of the convening and courage on the part of all the participants

as conversations diverged very quickly and became personal and socially situated.

Beyond the journal, the conversations within my first convening covered everything from managing white privilege in micro and macro settings to the role of very specific methodologies in affecting change in educational equity. The conversations were intense yet intentional and the organizers took turns facilitating space to unpack or scaffold the complexities of ideas that came up. Though the convening was only three days long, I recall the depth of community built within that space with clarity and fondness. I recall the odd sensation of feeling both vulnerable and safe in a way I had never felt with academics. Somehow, this group had managed to co-create a space of discussion, venting, and problem solving that I had thus far only experienced within my artistic and home communities. But what made this possible?

COMMUNITY IMPACT

What made it possible for this group of educators to create a community from such an inherently messy and vague theme as “Educational Equity”? As I reflect on my time within this group, I recall first that the group prioritized the individual. Every conversation and interaction began with some articulated concern for each person as a human first. Frequently dialogues began by asking everyone to share whatever they needed to share “to be present” in our space. Often, this led to discussions of personal issues, mental health concerns, and other affective elements. Though no one ever tried to “fix” whatever concern was raised, space was made to allow every person to deal with their issue in whatever way felt most natural for them. This attention to the whole person, beyond their contribution to the topic at hand, created conversations that were centered in compassion. Such compassion allowed every participant to engage only as far as they felt comfortable while still being present with the topic that held the conversation together.

In addition to the priority for the individual, the organizers of the convening created a flow of conversations and events that was fluid, responsive, and emergent. Though there were specific items related to the journal that needed to be addressed during our time together, they agenda for the three days was malleable to the desires of the group. For example, some agenda items that had initially been planned as large group discussions became small group discussions once we noticed the tendencies for some voices to be silenced in discussion groups with more than 10 people. Though the group was only 25 people, these

smaller breakout sessions offered three or four topics of conversation. These options allowed participants to opt in and out of certain topics in a way that both challenged and supported them. For myself in particular, I recall wanting to join a group around racial bias and privilege but not having the emotional or intellectual capacity to engage with it too deeply. The conversations were flexible enough so that I could listen and engage with one topic and move seamlessly to a different topic or group without feeling obligated to “finish” a topic or get a point across.

Though many environmental factors contributed greatly to the emergent and compassionate nature of the convening (the location being a meditative retreat center as one large one), there were a few internal traits of each participant I observed that seemed to make the interactions possible. First, regardless of the primary industry or discipline of the participant, every participant seemed to embody a sense of virtue and character that was relatively salient. This is not to say that every participant was flawless in some saintly way or that everyone was extroverted, because quite the opposite was true. There was, however, clear mention made of the expertise and experience of each person that made it easy to surface and highlight certain virtues. I recall feeling that everyone had some level of each of the following characteristics: commitment, vulnerability, humility, respect, optimism, and expertise.

These characteristics showed up in different levels of intensity in each person. For example, one person may have had a strong commitment to the idea of educational equity but had little expertise in their discipline. Others may have had a breadth of experiences that contributed to deep expertise but very little optimism around the topic of educational equity relative to others in the room. Regardless of the concentration of any of the above characteristics, the space that was co-created allowed everyone to demonstrate and leverage each of their characteristics in whichever way aligned with their own motivations for joining the convening.

In addition to these characteristics showing up in different ways for different people, the emergent nature of the space allowed for connections to be made across these characteristics between people. For example, my expertise as an artist and poet with a strong community focus enhanced the depth of respect other participants had for the funds of knowledge that come with creative and community-based endeavors. In this sense, the boundaries between these characteristics were permeable and allowed us to strengthen ourselves with the strengths of others.

The priority of compassion also affected how these characters were embodied in this space. Because everyone was expected to participate in ways that felt natural to them, space was made to discuss barriers to participation. For example, those who required physical accommodations were given priority in deciding room configurations and agenda layouts. This allowed others to demonstrate their respect for others in ways that they may not have considered before. This priority for compassion also allowed each of us to negotiate our vulnerabilities in ways that are often stifled in dissimilar settings. Knowing that a specific and often singular request or need would be respected and honored made it feel like less of a burden to, for example, need a moment of silent reflection for emotional processing.

Though one would suspect that a space as flexible and permeable as the one I have just described would struggle to find itself productive in any tangible ways, the members of this convening were able to come up with some potentially impactful interventions. The journal, which was just an idea with some funding when we arrived, had committees, an editor, and a plan for outreach once the convening ended. In our time together, those who were interested brainstormed and co-created a reflective and accessible procedure for calling and processing contributions to the journal. I was able to voice my concerns for the prioritization of nonacademic perspectives, and others were able to articulate their concerns with the typical journal review process in which people stand as gatekeepers for the authors and their ideas. Ultimately, we decided to have “creators” instead of “authors” and “reflectors” instead of “reviewers.” We decided on a process in which creators submit to a scope team that determines if and how the artifact relates to educational equity and passes the creation along to a group of reflectors. These reflectors do not judge the piece, but rather reflect on the ideas incited by the piece and ask probing questions that elicit more clarity. The entire process of reflection and responses would then be affixed to the artifact and the creator could decide how or if to incorporate the reflections. After edits and/or discussion, the final artifact would be published in an open access online space with links to the reflections and process development process.

Even as the first issue of the journal has recently been published, this process is evolving and constantly being revised. Working collaboratively while prioritizing emergence and compassion, we were able to create a journal that has the potential to expand conversations around educational equity and simultaneously invite participation from community groups that may not have had access to this discourse.

Though there are many kinks to work through, the team is still working together and in the process of securing funding to keep the convenings and journal open and free to the public. We are actively seeking ways to incorporate more educators with similar concerns, and we are constantly reifying our commitment to each other and educational equity.

AUTHOR IMPACT

It has now been two years since I received that forwarded e-mail inviting me to join the Murmurations group. In that time, I have evolved as an artist, researcher, and community member, which has come with many experiences that have shaped my outlook and concern for the world. While the interactions I had within the Murmurations group were rich with emergence and compassion, every collaborative work environment I have engaged in has not been that way. In fact, on the quest to make more inclusive spaces with more representation from marginalized groups, I have found myself on the receiving and observing end of countless experiences of disenfranchisement, silencing, and marginalization. Such experiences have deeply affected my ability to process my impact and work and have developed within me an interesting skill set of coping mechanisms. Fortunately, art and poetry are useful tools in expressing and processing complex and painful experiences as these outlets have become more and more useful over time.

In addition to the spaces I have created to heal myself individually, spaces like Murmurations have functioned as conceptual makerspaces for me to design and implement my healing and resistance to marginalization. It would be inaccurate to say that the Murmurations group was so marvelously inclusive that I never experienced marginalization within those interactions, but I can certainly say that the emergent and compassionate nature of our interactions made dealing with those instances more possible and poignant. For example, in the spring of 2018 I was encouraged to submit a poem I had written on microaggressions to the inaugural issue of the *Murmurations* journal. Due to the very personal nature of the experiences that had generated the piece, I was very nervous about submitting it as I wasn't sure if I was open to process feedback and suggestions. After a bit of reflection, I recalled the values that had been used to develop the journal and was comforted by the fact that I was not submitting my poetry to be judged or reviewed. Instead, within the Murmurations model, I was submitting my work to be reflected upon by others. This thought decreased my concern for being judged and

allowed me to look forward to the idea of getting critical yet thoughtful reflections.

Because life is not a Lifetime movie, the reflection process was nowhere near as sweet and romantic as I would have liked it to be. Though the reflectors assigned to my piece were well intending and honest, their reflections were still a bit more than I was ready to stomach. One review in particular stuck out as the reflector suggested I use “more Ebonics” in my poem. I was flabbergasted. I was receiving microaggressive feedback on a poem about microaggressions, and from a person I trusted at that! Upon reading her comment (and the article she suggested that very painfully detailed what I already well knew about African American vernacular English), I consulted with a few friends about how I should respond. Their suggestions ranged from “withdraw the piece” to “add a line in the poem about microaggressive reviewers.” I took my time processing how I wanted to proceed and eventually found myself excited to take advantage of the intentions that had been initially poured into the journal.

Instead of pulling the piece, I recalled that the goal of the journal had been to create a space where important dialogues could occur. Even further, I recalled that the role of the reflectors was not to determine what could or could not be published, but rather to reflect what the contribution incited within them. It was awful happenstance, then, that my poem on microaggressions had incited a microaggressive remark, but, because of the way we had designed the journal, this remark (and whatever my response would be) would be a part of the final published document. This fact gave me solace. I did not have to outright refute the remark nor figure out how to sound “more Black.” I could instead respond by reaffirming my agency in choosing my own diction and allow the reflection to speak for itself in the final publication. In a sense, I felt protected by the transparency of the publication process of *Murmurations* and was able to use the emergent nature of the journal to transform the publication into something that reflected my lived experience in real time.

The reflector and I were able to eventually have a few conversations about her intentions and my reception of the comment. Within these conversations, the same priority of compassion was present as we were both careful to use *I* statements and to speak up for the sensations and thoughts that our interaction elicited in each other. Though these were not easy or enjoyable conversations, they were productive and powerful toward increasing understanding, providing reconciliation and a

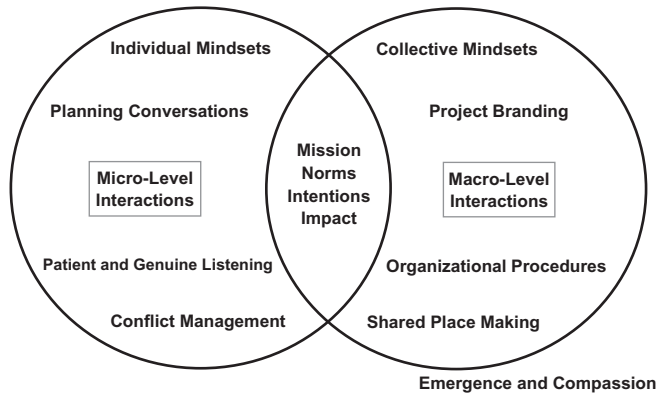


Figure 1. Summary of my experience in the Murmurations group.

means for future support. Even further, the reality of the journal allowed us both to share our learning experience with others, which made our efforts feel doubly useful as others may not have to learn and engage as we had.

CONCLUSION

Though no group is perfect, my experience working with the Murmurations group and journal has shown me how the experience of collaborative work can be transformed when emergence and compassion are prioritized in micro and macro interactions. Though discomfort, doubt, and ignorance can never be completely avoided, the Murmurations group embodies how these things can be addressed through patient and genuine listening, place-making, and design.

By infusing every convening, meeting, and interaction with a priority for the individual and making space for their character to shine and connect with others, the Murmurations group has managed to create one of the few spaces I have genuinely felt included in. Though I cannot be sure if any space is overarchingly “safe,” I can confidently say that collaborating from a place of emergence and compassion allowed me to be brave in tackling difference and powerful yet painful paradigm shifts.

With these things in mind, it would be interesting to see how socially engaged design projects could be transformed by creating spaces where people were engaged and highlighted according to the principles of emergence and compassion. Within my own research and practice, I’ve witnessed a difference in relationships built with students and community partners when I have treated them with compassion and consideration for their identities and expertise beyond our service-learning projects. It is my hope that this reflection inspires more thoughtful people-centered engagement and design of experiences and artifacts that address issues of equity in a way that marginalizes less and emerges more. In this light, we can co-create solutions and interventions with the very people we seek to serve. I have summarized my experience with the Murmurations group in Figure 1 with the hope that it provides a framework for co-creating compassionate relationships during engagement work that allows for emergence and ideally creates alignment between intention and impact.

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