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Empowering Diverse Student Voices through Pedagogical Partnership: Expanding Perspective for Increasing Relevance and Access to Curriculum and Learning

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EMPOWERING DIVERSE STUDENT VOICES THROUGH PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP: EXPANDING PERSPECTIVE FOR INCREASING RELEVANCE AND ACCESS TO CURRICULUM AND LEARNING

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Introduction

Faculty in physical therapy educate students to provide patient-centered, clinical care to a diverse population of clients. In the United States, while clients continue to diversify, our faculty and students remain homogenously White and middle class in racial identity and demographic. General efforts towards developing an inclusive, diverse, and equitable pedagogy in higher education have focused on important first steps. Examples include increasing awareness of and strategies for eliminating microaggressions, reducing stereotypes, developing cultural competence, incorporating classroom materials that represent varied identities, and structuring activities and dialogue to foster participation by all students. While these efforts are laudable, research supports looking beyond cultural competence in health professions education and moving towards an anti-oppressive curriculum that incorporates critical consciousness, social justice, and multi-cultural education to explore the root causes of health inequities (Bell, 2007; Bettez, 2011; Hoffman, 2016). Curriculum restructuring and revisions of pedagogical approaches can meet the contemporary needs of students and clients. Yet, an important question arises: "Whose voices should be included in the dialogue about such restructuring and revision?" We believe it is critically important to include the perspectives of students who are members of equity-seeking groups whose voices are often underrepresented and unheard. Including diverse voices in curricular planning has the potential to increase relevance, expand perspective, and improve student access to materials.

To foster dialogue about and explore perspectives on diverse, equitable, and inclusive teaching, a pedagogical partnership was formed in a single space between two professors and two students in a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) program at Northeastern University (NU). As part of a structured discussion, we read and collaboratively discussed de Bie, Marquis, Cook-Sather, and Luqueno's (2021) book, *Promoting Equity and Justice through Pedagogical Partnership*. In this book, the authors present a theory that underscores the violence and harm that students experience related to non-inclusive classrooms and practices in higher education. The theory posits harm felt by students from equity-seeking groups in three domains: epistemic (knowledge, validity, and scope); ontological (nature of being); and affective (feeling). This framework provided a common language to our team for sharing ideas about pedagogy that were concrete and identifiable.

Through our pedagogical partnership, we created an opportunity for students with different identities, positionalities, and lived experiences to partner with faculty to raise awareness

regarding diversity in coursework in the healthcare field, and positioning equity and justice as core educational aims. Our goal in writing this reflective essay was to capture the perspectives of a team of physical therapy professors and students and contribute to the evolving mindset about pedagogical partnership. For our work we use "marginalized" to describe individuals excluded, whether intentional or implicit, from contributing their views and perceptions due to unequal power dynamics. We use the words "equity-seeking" to transition the role of students from excluded to empowered through action directed towards transformative change and equitable learning environments.

What Brought us to this Conversation: Individual Perspectives

Lorna, Physical Therapy Professor

My journey to this space was catalyzed by my dissertation work on the topic of reflection and reflective practice. Reading the literature in this area, I discovered the content of two powerful books resonated with how I was feeling and developing knowledge as a woman and scholar. *In a Different Voice* (Gilligan, 1993) was enlightening because it legitimized women's voices and explored how, despite the feminist movement, many women still feel unheard at home and in work venues that are dominated by male cultural norms and values. A second book, *Women's Way of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), explored the perspectives of a diverse group of women, focusing on identity, cognitive development, and relationship (voice) with other people. The book described five knowledge positions, ranging from the lowest level of silence to the highest level of constructed knowledge, through which women view self, knowledge, and voice.

Together, these books provided a theory and language for understanding and describing my developing self and emerging cognition and viewpoints on purpose, profession, and relationships. The wisdom from these books affirmed that the dominant perspective of thinking, fueled by my upbringing, educational experiences, and employment, were traditional, sexist, and not shared by me. Often unable to articulate my perspective, in many venues, I was silent. Through self-reflection I believe I have reached Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) stage of "*constructed knowledge,* which calls for a capacity to feel connected with another person despite enormous differences" (p. 15). Reading these books and through hours of personal reflection, I strive for legitimacy, with the goal of being heard, respected, and included. As a professor with 25 years of experience in higher education, I view a critical element in my job as mentoring others to find their voice in the academy and to connect authentically with people through rich conversation.

Lucy, Physical Therapy Graduate Student

When Dr. Hayward first approached me about the book discussion, I was daunted by the idea of participating in a conversation about sensitive topics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion. They were ideas I rarely thought about in my daily life, and as I would not deem most of my race-related experiences in the classroom as hurtful or harmful, I thought I had little to share. I was worried that if I entered the conversation with my level of knowledge, I could

in fact perpetuate misunderstandings and stereotypes about race, making the situation worse. Nevertheless, I wanted to learn more, and after Dr. Hayward assured me that it would be a safe place and an opportunity to learn, I decided to join.

As I read through the book, I realized for the first time how the way my classmates and teachers perceived my Chinese heritage in elementary school had affected the value I put on it. While I was happy to share my culture's holidays and language when asked to, I sometimes felt that my Chinese heritage was good for little else. Instead, it was a constant barrier that kept me from completely fitting in and understanding my classmates and teachers. Seeing those thoughts and experiences analyzed and categorized in de Bie et al.'s (2021) framework provided a sense of affirmation that empowered me to talk about these experiences with some of my friends. Through those conversations, I began to understand how the pressure to fit the mold of the model minority, to never make a fuss and just follow the rules to succeed, was in fact creating complacency.

I also gained a better understanding of how cultural differences and stereotypes had affected my classmates in different ways. As an Asian American whose parents always prioritized education, for most of my life I experienced little epistemic violence because I tended to fit the mold of the "good student." Thus, I was not always aware of how inaccessible and unfair curriculums and classrooms could be.

Izzy, Physical Therapy Graduate Student

My interest in this work comes from a growing realization of hurtful experiences in higher education. As a student, I did not always feel that I had options in the way a classroom or its policies are structured, creating a sense of helplessness and a necessity to adopt a mindset of survival just to make it through courses. I have attended predominantly White institutions since I was in kindergarten, which created a sense of normalcy with the invisible oppressive structures that were built around me. White history, customs, and heritage were the standard discourse, with anything else being considered a distraction in my K-12 school. These seeds of dominant culture and education were planted in my mind at an incredibly young age and were only reinforced as the years progressed. My education was never something that was malleable. It was not until I read *Promoting Equity and Justice through Pedagogical Partnership* that I began to untangle years of harm.

Before I read the above book, I would not have classified my experiences as 'harm.' The conditioning that I experienced was, at most, an unfortunate series of events that I wished were different. There was a nagging sense of discontent that had no tangible words to accurately describe how I was feeling. The powers at play felt so large that there was no way to understand them. Now, I have an eloquent way to understand and discuss the qualities that a student brings to the classroom and, more importantly, how these qualities contribute to negative experiences when they are ignored or dismissed. The knowledge from this book has allowed me to have more meaningful discussions with my fellow classmates, professors, and even colleagues at work who are far removed from traditional higher education but recognize the plights that occur in all institutions.

Heidi, Physical Therapy Professor

As a healthcare provider for 20 years and currently a teacher in higher education, I have witnessed power dynamics that exist within our ecosystem with prevalent hierarchies that impact social justice, yet many live their days being oblivious to this reality. Privileged individuals who reap the benefits from such hierarchical structures may become accepting of them, even if it influences the destructive nature of oppression for others (Bell, 2016; McIntosh, 2004). "It is what it is" can become a mantra of acceptance for these power hierarchies by both those oppressed and those who are privileged. Recent events in the media, such as the guilty verdict of Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd, highlight the symbolic nature of historical underestimation and acceptance of abuse of power with the need for change, even if met with some tensions and hesitations from those who are privileged. As an educator, I know that even well-intentioned social justice change agents in this role can unconsciously act on oppression in the classroom with the presence of hegemony and operations of power.

Interactions with students in my classroom and my studies in the EdD program at NU, with social justice underpinnings, led me to search deeper into understanding the inequities that exist within the classroom. Recently, after a class I lectured on, I received an email from a student who brought to my attention the misinformation I provided regarding why African Americans are more susceptible to stroke based on statistical data. The message I, as their teacher, provided to the class was that there does not seem to be a clear explanation as to why this is. I neglected to discuss how healthcare inequities play a critical role with this statistical analysis and is a modifiable risk factor impacting population health. Not only was this a missed opportunity on so many levels, especially as an EdD candidate researching inequities within education, but the incident also caused unnecessary harm to my students with emotional repercussions. Fortunately, with the students' collaboration, we dialogued with the entire class the week proceeding this incident for the student's voices to be heard. This was an extremely powerful moment for both me as the teacher and all the students. At this moment, the concept of pedagogical partnerships transformed into something tangible within my classroom, creating an indispensable brave safe space for our equity-seeking students.

Perspective and Learning

Lorna

Participation in our team's ongoing discussion of *Promoting Equity and Justice through Pedagogical Partnership* has heightened my awareness for identifying and checking my own unconscious biases, privilege, and oppressive actions both in and outside of the classroom. Once sensitized to the harm these actions have on others, ignoring them is impossible. With each conversation with our team, I am surprised by how much I learn, how careful I need to be in conversation, and how I can serve as a catalyst for facilitating a social justice driven learning community that includes a voice for students. I am amazed and humbled by the wisdom, experiences, and suggestions that the students have shared with me.

I think individuals, such as faculty, who are in positions of power, possess insight, and desire to make change, must boldly create disruption, invite, and create safe spaces for students to collaborate with faculty about pedagogy and curriculum design. Participating in these conversations feels scary but necessary. Initially, I felt uneasy extending an offer to equity-seeking students because of the potential for an unequal power dynamic; I was worried that I might unintentionally offend or continue to harm other students. However, over time, our team has evolved, and now when we meet, my perspective changes for the better.

Heidi

The experiences I mention above fueled much interest in engaging in scholarly work towards creating a critical community within the classroom with a two-way partnership with students that championed and augmented their voices. Reading *Promoting Equity and Justice through Pedagogical Partnerships* and participating in the discussions with other educators and students opened my eyes to the often-unseen violence inflicted upon students daily in the classroom. Even unintended epistemic, affective, and ontological harms can have a detrimental long lasting negative impact on students, a burdensome load that students should not be responsible to carry through life. Through the scholarly work of de Bie and colleagues, and rich dialogue with students, I have gained a greater appreciation of the power of pedagogical partnerships and the role I play as an educator to create a brave safe space for students to find, know, and share their voices. The next step with our partnership is to nurture this empowered classroom community to come alive not only within my classroom but through sharing strategies with other educators and students based on this framework for transformative change to be tangible in nature.

Lucy

It is easy to be a bystander to violence in the classroom, whether by choice or unconsciously. I used to think that because I did not have enough knowledge or the "right" experiences to share, my voice did not matter. Through this ongoing conversation, I am learning that giving my perspective does not diminish the voices of others. Everyone's experiences and struggles deserve to be heard.

Something I've learned is that we must give people space to make mistakes, so they are not afraid to share what they know. However, at the same time, we cannot perpetuate the comfort of the familiar and the established by turning a blind eye when mistakes are made. We must somehow simultaneously acknowledge the inadequacy of what is being done, as well as the effort and progress made to address the harms created by the educational system.

Izzy

As a student, I find it can be difficult to understand the faculty perspective, and why seemingly intuitive measures are not implemented, such as creating paid opportunities to explore diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the classroom and having safe spaces for all students to discuss problems that they are experiencing. The intersection of faculty and students has been a

critical one for my personal empathy towards complex situations related to DEI. If other students knew of the concerted efforts to create systemic change, the comfort level around faculty might increase.

Suggestions/Tangible Outcomes

Based on our team's reading and discussion of *Promoting Equity and Justice through Pedagogical Partnership* we provide some outcomes and recommendations for educators and students related to structuring inclusive teaching and learning opportunities. As educators, we must recognize and address implicit, unconscious, and conscious bias within curricular materials (i.e., lectures, hands-on labs, simulation experiences, service-learning, assessment, guest speakers) to enhance equity, inclusion, and social justice. One suggestion for faculty is to incorporate student pedagogical consultants in their classrooms. Student consultant teams (SCT) are comprised of three to five students who volunteer for this role (Nuhfer, 1995). Student pedagogical team members collaborate with enrolled students to collect feedback and, with the course professor, share and discuss key points related to instruction. This approach requires an ongoing investment of time from the professor, the members of the SCT, and to a lesser extent, the other enrolled students. Students who serve on SCTs must be willing to collect, synthesize, and summarize feedback, and meet with faculty regularly throughout the semester.

Two members of our team are currently involved in an SCT partnership. From the student consultant perspective, it is beneficial to see student suggestions implemented over time. Student feedback becomes an established step in the teaching and lesson planning process and encourages students to speak up before problems become bigger issues that result in, at the worst, resentment and bitterness between professors and students. Using SCT, both faculty and students are proactively addressing areas of need, miscommunication, and can mitigate the harm produced by inevitable differences in ideas and worldviews.

Another key step towards change is sharing what both faculty and students have learned through this pedagogical partnership experience with departments and the wider student body. Structured collaborative opportunities with students through department meetings, retreats, and other programming can share learning about pedagogy. A shared framework assists faculty with evaluation of the effectiveness of cultural inclusion in their classrooms, reconsidering whether they are truly empathetic with efforts towards needed change. Student-faculty teams, through department-wide efforts, can establish a culture of teaching and learning that is healthy and inclusive. Through pedagogical partnerships developed department wide, space is created for students to provide sustained feedback through which they can express themselves without fear of retaliation or other harm. Students, like faculty, could learn from and even be empowered to speak up as a result of hearing about both the successes and challenges of SCT efforts. Information about SCT efforts could be shared through student panels or written testimonials by past and current SCTs to prospective SCTs.

However, both student and faculty perspectives are presented with challenges when partnerships are introduced. Asking students to recall traumatic experiences can catalyze change, but may result in significant and sustained emotional labor for an equity-seeking individual, Creating paid positions for students is, arguably, a necessary first step toward legitimizing their efforts.

Acknowledging this affective aspect of partnership can be accomplished through creating a safe space for emotional check-ins, trigger warnings, and opportunities to disengage from difficult topics.

From the faculty perspective, it can be uncomfortable receiving feedback from students regarding harmful experiences created by a pedagogical approach. Faculty who practice self-reflexivity, including on their demographical positioning, may exhibit more cultural identity self-awareness, which may reduce bias in curriculum delivery. Pedagogical change within critical communities of student-faculty partnerships can create a safe space for social justice dialogue. The dialogue may prepare DPT students to be collaborative healthcare providers who meet the diverse needs of vulnerable, patient populations (Bettez, 2011).

Introduction of SCTs challenges faculty to balance engaging student voices while attending to the epistemic demands of rigorous curriculum and academic excellence. Including dialogue about teaching and learning requires faculty and students to realize it may displace content. For students, a fear is that displacing content with process may mean they are underprepared for professional practice, while faculty may struggle to feel effective as educators. These perspectives may hinder dialogue about education processes and curriculum, with neither side willing to make room for new content, time to apply content, and process what is being taught. We believe that instilling trust through authentic partnership may be as essential as the content of instruction. For professors, the challenge is including current material in the profession, while simultaneously communicating with the students to understand the impact of instruction. Ultimately, the goal is for students to develop the tools to think critically, which allows them to solve any problem rather than only specific problems. We maintain that it is essential that this work be sustainable within the classroom, which in turn leads to a consequential impact that is palpable in real-life experiences. Generating trust through authentic partnership is as essential as instructional content. Although there are concrete examples of partnership above, the act of engaging students and faculty can take different forms based on what is suitable for a specific classroom dynamic.

A final suggestion is for faculty to include student-led projects that consider their interests, resources during the pandemic, learning styles, and culturally responsive teaching (Kolbe, 2009). Faculty can facilitate projects to enable equity-seeking students to choose a topic that is meaningful to them, such as impact the pandemic/COVID-19 on marginalized oppressed groups access to healthcare. Relevant assignments facilitate students' connections with classroom content in the moment, not just in preparation for later living. Curriculum is more relevant, especially with students struggling in the classroom, if they value the learning and share their voice in real-world project partnerships. Again, although there are concrete examples of partnership above, the act of engaging students and faculty can take on different forms based on what is suitable for the specific classroom dynamic.

Conclusion

 Collectively reading and discussing *Promoting Equity and Justice through Pedagogical Partnership* increased the sensitivity in two faculty members for including students from equity-seeking groups in the teaching and learning process. Initially, the structured book discussion established trust and common ground between the participants. The book's framework

introduced powerful language through which students and faculty could communicate their experiences and concerns. For students, the dialogue was empowering because their stories and experiences were valued, and their suggestions were employed for tangible change. The collaborative experience enabled the students to realize possibilities, and faculty gained the student perspective so that harms can be addressed. Ultimately, through pedagogical partnerships, both students and faculty in physical therapy can embody equity behaviors, leading to a social justice driven healthcare system which may dismantle health inequities.

Modeling classroom cultures that are inclusive and welcoming of diverse perspectives can prepare students to foster open dialogue in real-world interactions with oppressed groups. Empowerment through a classroom culture that considers the human individuality of the student, especially during the pandemic, will create a space for all voices to be heard.

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