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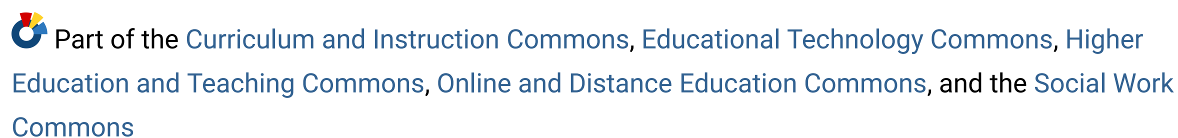

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A PARTICIPATORY EXERCISE IN DEVELOPING SYLLABI WITH ADULT LEARNERS

Laneshia Conner, Ph.D.; V. Nikki Jones, DSW; and Jason P. Johnston, Ph.D.

Abstract

Transformative participatory approaches in education are positioned to challenge traditional models where instructors bear all responsibility for knowledge creation and learners are passive recipients of knowledge. The promotion of participatory learning and critical pedagogy is essential to helping professionals seeking to understand oppressive structural barriers and employing strategies to dismantle these structures. This article describes a participatory approach undertaken to guide learners through an exercise to co-create syllabus content in a graduate social work course. Learners identified three themes, concerns, fears, and problems, related to the course material. Learners were also asked to think about how they could address the three themes to apply new information to problem solve. Through the syllabus cloud activity, learners shaped course content, decided on the format to deliver content, and applied their status as adult learners in an intentional way. As educators prepare to critically and intentionally dismantle aspects of the learning milieu that may perpetuate systems of oppression, collaborative learning and teaching can help to reduce oppressive practices. Reflections for formative and summative evaluation and future research are discussed.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, participatory learning, graduate education

Participation as an act of sharing is different than participation as an act of sharing power (White, 1996). Formal education has a history of occurring in schools under trained professionals and relies heavily on the participation of both instructors and learners. Instructors are positioned to exercise a great amount of authority over their learners, playing critical roles in their development, with institutionalized roles that often mimic the values of the dominant culture (Kumashiro, 2000; Strong, 2007). Previous scholars, such as Paulo Freire (2005), have created dialogues about this positioning, stating that instructors are often placed in positions that involve an oppressive dominant culture. Of note is that Eurocentric knowledge has been centered as legitimate knowledge, therefore, the experiences of other cultures and their learning styles and pedagogical needs have been greatly minimized (Kumashiro, 2000). There are many other challenges and complex nuances related to relational dynamics in education, as such, social constructivism provides a guide to understanding the interactional space that both learners and instructors can occupy, and that illustration of relational power can be mutually constructed and negotiated between the two groups (Manke, 1997; Kumashiro, 2000; Strong, 2007). The classroom is a place where power relations can be addressed, and instructors have an opportunity to raise awareness among learners while affirming and respecting the culture of the learners and their needs (Sidky, 2017). Even though instructors are bound to accreditation and department-specific standards, therefore unable to fully share power (White, 1996), it is hopeful that participatory models can be leveraged and used to increase the sharing of power with students. The transformative power of addressing the complexities of shared power inside the classroom have potential to address oppression, change narratives, and redistribute power among learners (Mertens, 2007).

Background

Paulo Freire led the discussion and development of reflecting on educational practices that are inherently oppressive and perpetuate the marginalization of learners (Adams et al., 2016). Freire (2005) challenged the banking concept of education, which views students as empty receptacles for teachers to fill, as an instrument of oppression common in all disciplines. While the application of critical consciousness in social work education is relatively new, this type of awareness is important for learners entering the workforce and for instructors during course development.

This paper reflects on the position of adult learners and their instructors and aims to provide an idea for human service educators with curriculum planning and considerations that actively involve learners in the learning process (Ismail & Groccia, 2022). When using terms, such as "participatory," great care should be taken to understand the context of participation during learning activities. This becomes extremely important when participation is used as an action to change the development of a certain part of a course. This paper attempts to look at the challenge of sharing power in the classroom using a critical perspective (Freire, 2005; Knipe, 2020; Kumashiro, 2000; Kumashiro, 2006). A critical perspective, a lens that allows for the questioning and challenging of dominant ideologies while acknowledging different interpretations and valuing those differences, was adopted throughout the paper with a purpose of advocating a pedagogical stance that would encourage the empowerment of learners by way of sharing in the construction of course components. While in formative stages, it is the hope of the authors to communicate the intent behind the actions taken in an isolated observation to develop a better understanding of how to share power or redistribute power in the classroom.

Participatory learning and critical pedagogy (Bohman, Flynn, & Celikates, 2019; Freire, 2005; Kincheloe, 2004), while distinct in their origins and characteristics, share tools and strategies to develop the knowledge base of adult learners, which can contribute to educational developments that lead to social change and contextualized learning experiences (Bozalek & Biersteker, 2010). Participatory learning has roots in critical pedagogy, where radical transformations of education within educational institutions have resided (Taylor & Fransman, 2003). Participatory learning (PL) is an educational method that concerns itself with social and community justice and the collective approach to adult education (Missingham, 2013). Akin to the present reflection, PL draws upon the participants, in this instance adult learners, as the co-constructers of the learning experience. Through shared leadership, learning is more representative of the people involved.

Critical pedagogy shares in the collaborative process of reflexive thinking by innovating teaching practices to be more representative of adult learners; yet longstanding practices of graduate education are often resistant and, at times, counterproductive to the dialogic approaches in PL. An enduring convention of teacher-centered processes of graduate education include deficit approaches to pedagogy: the teacher is the expert, the curriculum is designed with the most salient components, conventional lectures serve the purpose of providing knowledge, exams are able to assess learners' abilities and capacities related to course material, and, most importantly, the learners' experiences are valued based on the quantification of memorized knowledge and performance-based assessments. As graduate programs continue to struggle to find constructive ways of engaging, interacting, and assessing learners across learning environments (e.g., online, face-to-face, hybrid, hyflex, etc.), analysis and critique of educational practices using critical pedagogies have advantages for adult education.

In keeping with the discussion about critical pedagogies, PL can be defined as an emancipatory educational approach with the ability to supplant traditional vertical relationships and "deposit-making" pedagogies with collaborative learning and "co-intentional practices" where both learners and teachers are subjects who create reality (Freire, 2005, p. 79). Historically, graduate education has participated in PL through explicit curriculum. For example, in social work graduate education, learners developing an action-oriented project in their field placement to learn anti-racist skills (e.g., Basham et al., 2001), having critical dialogue in a social policy course about reports of race-based laws that are unconstitutional

(e.g., Knipe, 2020), and developmental activities such as confronting oppression and developing critical consciousness through other frameworks using a transcultural perspective (e.g., Drabble et al., 2012).

In the late 1960s, John Dewey suggested that learners' needs should be integrated with social demands, encouraging freedom and structure to interact with one another as opposed to against one another (Williams, 2017). One of Dewey's larger contributions was the notion that learners' experiences must include a form of engagement through the creation of opportunities by the instructor. This is where the difference in the type of participation becomes paramount. How can instructors empower learners through emancipatory educational practices, with the goal of sharing power and not just sharing in participation? Using narrative discourse, this article reflects on a participatory approach to engage learners in sharing power, to the fullest extent possible, by guiding learners through an exercise to co-create topical areas of a syllabus in a graduate-level social work course. The syllabus is a physical artifact that outlines key elements of a course, serving as a contract for communication and record-keeping (Fink, 2012; Wheeler, Palmer, & Aneece, 2019). While recent discussion has described the syllabus as a learning tool versus a contract between instructors and learners (i.e., Harrington, & Thomas, 2018; O'Brien, Millis, & Cohen, 2008), it provided the current opportunity to reflect on the imbalance of power that the syllabus as a contract created and encouraged the invitation to learners to help engineer parts of the syllabus to share power through decision making.

In social work education, a number of researchers have documented conscious and unconscious oppression within social work education, such as harassment, discrimination, different forms of violence, exclusion, differential treatment based on gender and race/ethnicity (Wagner & Yee, 2011). Less visible and yet equally harmful are ideologies that marginalize or minimize underrepresented groups and encourage learners who are non-White to conform to a mainstream ideology of learning. Learners respond to these treatments in different ways, which are not always easy to identify. For instance, a common way that Black students and other students of color conform is through code switching, which is when Black students change their interactional style to soften racial-ethnic identity in order to acclimate to the academic environment (Payne & Suddler, 2014). Hyper-performing and hidden injuries are terms associated with how learners can respond to oppressive treatments (Berila, 2016). Research has indicated that this conformity can negatively impact the social and academic performance of Black students (Payne & Suddler, 2014).

Some learners who internalize racial oppression have a lower value for higher education (Brown et al., 2016). Most traditional college students are emerging adults trying to configure an identity separate from their families of origin; however, as indicated by Payne and Suddler (2014), many Black students and other students of color are also reconciling a mainstream professional identity with their racial-ethnic identity. Therefore, it is crucial that academic spaces become more inclusive to reduce the strain and stress associated with marginalization and conformity within graduate social work education. Social work as a profession is complicated, as the effect of racist ideologies and power differentials can be observed across the curriculum in how programs value grading systems, program concentrations, and the diversity of its faculty. These decisions, among other observations, suggest that social work educators take swift action to address disparities, starting with what occurs in the academic space of a classroom. Like most disciplines, social work education is rooted in primarily Eurocentric discourse; thus, to eliminate racial bias and oppressive structures within the learning milieu, instructors will need to develop PL strategies and critical pedagogies that enable them to think alongside learners.

Kumashiro (2000) suggested two ways to develop inclusive and anti-oppressive education: (1) the provision of psychologically safe, physical spaces for learners and (2) teaching to all learners by incorporating facets of their identity into the classrooms. Paulo Freire (2005) challenged educators to critically reflect on oppressive teaching practices that reduced student voice and dialogue. Too often, professors present a classroom environment that turns a blind eye to pressing social issues due to fear of having to manage conflict, transference, and countertransference. The falsehood that classes can be declared 'safe spaces' needs to be disrupted because "[s]afe spaces emerge. They are not created" (Hunt, 2019, para. 9). Often the classroom space does not feel safe for a student from an underrepresented racial/ethnic group (hooks, 2014). What a professor might consider a "neutral space," where students are expected to quietly sit and listen to lectures,

may not feel safe for a student of color (hooks, 2014). So, race-based caucuses or affinity groups are important to offer as "within-group" safe spaces to support student engagement, reflection, and critical analysis (Abdullah et al., 2016; Varghese et al., 2019).

Further, anti-oppressive education extends beyond diversity to culturally relevant practices that challenge colorblindness or passive regard of learners' identities. Andragogy, adult learning principles, carries out this second suggestion by supporting the idea that adult learners should be involved in the learning process (Knowles et al., 2005). The principles of andragogy provide insight into strategies for facilitating adult learning, such as incorporating life experiences, fostering responsibility for one's own learning, and employing a self-directed approach (Deck et al., 2017). Central to the andragogical model is the assumption that adult learners have moved from being dependent on an authority for knowledge to being self-directed or independent in their self-concept as a learner (Knowles et al., 2005). Over time, adult learners' cumulative experiences shape what and how they learn. Based on social roles that one develops over time, adults orient learning to tasks associated with those roles. An adult's orientation to learning develops to an "immediacy of application" (Knowles, 1990, p. 119). Lastly, as one ages, the motivation to learn means something different and is more internal (Knowles et al., 2005).

Gitterman (2004) wrote that to create a climate for collaborative learning, the use of andragogical principles is needed. When learners give input, they transition from docile receivers of course content to co-creators with learning responsibilities (Freire, 2005). A syllabus exercise that invites, supports, and relies upon student participation and reactions to the course content and material is a learning strategy also described as a "liquid syllabus" (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020, p.11). With a liquid syllabus, the text is not in a fixed form until after class starts. In this way, the syllabus starts as a liquid rather than a solid. Learners help to shape and solidify aspects of the syllabus by negotiating with the instructor. Learners challenge the banking concept of education and internalized perceptions of themselves as passive recipients when they offer reactions to and help shape the course syllabus (Freire Institute, n.d.).

Ken Bain (2004), author of *What the Best College Teachers Do*, described a syllabus-creation scenario that encourages independent ways of thinking for future adult learners. A *promising syllabus*, which is not a phrase he constructed but one he adopted and enhanced, is the course's promise to learners, indicating what they will gain from the course by the end of the semester. The syllabus describes the activities that they will engage in to fulfill that promise (Lang, 2006).

Adopting a new way of viewing the role of educator can pose a challenge, particularly when institutions of higher education have not prepared learners to think in a way that is intentionally anti-oppressive. As Freire (2005) noted, the traditional banking concept of education promotes passivity among learners; therefore, change may be difficult for learners who are unconscious about the oppressive nature of traditional education. These learners may be disinterested and undetermined to switch roles from a receiver of knowledge to a co-creator with learning responsibilities. Even with this challenge in mind, anti-oppressive education still supports the strengths perspective in social work practice (Saleebey, 2013) and active teaching and learning, which is common in higher education and widely validated as beneficial to students (Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d.). Thus, based on the suggestion from Gitterman (2004) to encourage input starting in the first class and with the course syllabus, I, the lead author on this publication, created the syllabus exercise to overcome power relations in the classroom, promote mutual collaboration between learner and instructor on an activity, and employ a self-directed adult learning approach.

The Syllabus Exercise

This activity was not conducted as a systematic investigation to develop generalizable knowledge; therefore, IRB approval was not required. The experiences described herein are shared for reflective teaching and learning purposes only. The syllabus exercise was conducted in a graduate social work course, which was second in a two-course sequencing of

human behavior in the social context. For context, this social work course was delivered at a private teaching institution. The learners were registered as part-time, social work graduate learners and had the same instructor for the previous course. There was a total of eight learners who identified as female. The course was structured using a hybrid model with three face-to-face meetings and online course content in between the face-to-face meetings.

The guiding framework for this activity was a participatory learning framework, which can allow for reflective processes to uncover what learners know and help them create new meaning (Simmons, Barnard, & Fennema, 2011). The reason for the syllabus exercise was to encourage participatory learning and engage in shared decision making. Not many learners can look back and say, “I helped construct my course syllabus,” and “I directly influenced what I learned and how it was delivered.” The syllabus exercise was also a way to begin the course with a collaborative exercise to facilitate fuller participation.

During the first class meeting, the syllabus, which included standard information that is found in all syllabi (i.e., instructor contact information, meeting dates, course description, accessibility statement, course information, course objectives, textbook information, expectations, and a grading scale) was displayed. There was an additional page of an outline of the course schedule, with dates as placeholders and themes from the text. The themes were the focus of this course, including developmental stages, from pre-pregnancy to late adulthood. Therefore, it was easy to have text chapters correspond with the themes because the text went in the same order. There were no assignments listed in the syllabus, as the intention of the first meeting was to facilitate a conversation on the themes of the course and how to achieve knowledge of those themes. The draft syllabus was displayed on the projector and learners were given time to review it. The syllabus cloud activity was introduced and explained, with emphasis that we would build not only the activities for the course but also decide what practice skills they hoped to gain to make the knowledge applicable. Here is a breakdown of the agenda for the initial class meeting:

- For the first 15 minutes, the instructor explained their teaching philosophy, style, and beliefs and how they were informed by adult learning principles. This was a necessary first step because many learners have come from a traditional way of being present in a classroom where the instructor leads or wields power as the knowledge bearer, and they are participants, active or passive.
- Next, for the second 15 minutes, the grading and assessment philosophies were explained. It was explained that their participation in the critical reflection and critique of their peers was also a part of assessment.
- For the third 15 minutes, the Syllabus Cloud activity was introduced.

The Syllabus Cloud Activity

There were four primary steps involved in the syllabus cloud activity:

1. Introduction of main skills to be developed in the course.
2. Learners share fears.
3. Learners make connections.
4. Learners apply new information to problem solve.

A brief introduction of the main skills that learners would gain from the course was described. A few of these skills included studying human development in the social context, examining micro concerns of personal development, and using frameworks to evaluate theoretical explanations for human behavior across the lifespan. Afterwards, the syllabus was displayed on the projector to review the social work competencies and course description. The social work compe-

tencies in this course were engaging and assessing individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). The next step was to invite learners to share their biggest fears. In a slide presentation, the following topics from the course schedule in the syllabus were listed: defining human behavior, pre-pregnancy to early childhood, middle childhood to adolescence, early adulthood to middle adulthood, and late adulthood. Each learner was given several Post-it Notes and asked to write down their top five fears or problems in each category as it related to micro theoretical perspectives that emphasize the biological, psychological, sociological, and diversity dynamics of individual human behavior throughout the life cycle. It was emphasized to learners that the classroom was a protected space, and they were encouraged to step out of their comfort zone and be transparent about fears and concerns.

Next, learners were asked to connect the dots between the activities and fears. Once they had completed writing on the Post-it Notes, they were then asked to pick their top five overall fears and write each one on a separate post-it. After that step was completed, they brought their Post-it Notes to an adjacent wall. It was explained to them that we were going to create problem clouds, an activity where we could see what problems or fears were common among them. A learner was asked to volunteer to read their problem and post it. Afterward, for those remaining, they were asked to look at their Post-it Notes and see if they had similar problems or fears. Those who raised their hand then proceeded to add their Post-it Notes to the wall. This step was repeated until all of the Post-it Notes were on the wall. This act of sharing and grouping was only intended to discuss the content of the Post-it Notes, yet conversations veered into other discussions *about* the Post-it Notes. The last step consisted of learners using the newfound information about fears or problems related to the course. This step was introduced with the statement, "We are going to solve these problems!" After I returned to the podium and pulled up the course schedule, which included dates and tentative deliverables, a column was added using track changes for students' fears and problems. Using the groupings on the wall, and one by one, an inductive approach was used to analyze their statements based on the five topics of the course. The discussion was largely driven by the learners, with some moving their Post-it Notes to different 'clouds' after reconsidering or redefining what their Post-it meant.

Learners were asked to think about how they could address the three themes using course topics—an example of a concern related to adolescent development and parenting. A learner expressed concern that a parent could challenge their skills and knowledge because they did not have children of their own. Interestingly, the dialogue that followed this concern shifted the conversation. The learners came up with several categories of ways or activities that would be helpful in addressing their original perceived limitations. For tracking purposes, notes were recorded, and pictures were taken of the Post-it covered wall. As the class session concluded, we discussed how knowledge obtained from the course would help them solve some of their fears. The class was told that the syllabus would be updated and introduced before the next meeting.

Reflections

With the instructor as a facilitator, learners contributed ideas to create a syllabus for a graduate social work course. The syllabus cloud activity provided an opportunity for collaboration between learners and the instructor while slightly disrupting the traditional vertical hierarchy of education where instructors create a syllabus without input from learners (Freire, 2005; Knipe, 2020). The syllabus cloud activity was designed to move beyond what White (1996) described as nominal participation, that is, a display. It was intentioned that it would support instrumental and representative participation, where learners provided input and had an opportunity to leverage their influence about gathering and using learner input in the beginning stages of the course. This exercise also aimed to provide an opportunity for learners to shift from being consumers of education to co-creators, empowering them as well as exposing them to the issue of unintentionally perpetuating oppressive practices.

There are several important factors that should be considered before conducting the syllabus exercise. First, the exer-

cise may be challenging with larger class sizes and students and instructors who are unfamiliar with each other. The exercise was conducted with a small class of eight students and, therefore, was not difficult to execute with one instructor. Additionally, the instructor had a history with the learners. The established relationship contributed to a level of trust to speak freely and openly.

Secondly, a hallmark of most courses is a syllabus with a completed course schedule and corresponding assignments and activities. Consequently, the presentation of a draft syllabus and the absence of course information could provoke some anxiety or cause some learners to panic, as they look forward to reviewing the syllabus to gain an idea of key due dates and assignments. Departments may have requirements and expectations of teaching faculty to have information documented and publicly available for students, so there would need to be discussion with administrators and agreed-upon terms on how this would look in those instances.

As higher education prepares to accommodate online student learners due to the residual effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the flexibility that this activity affords needs to be modified for face-to-face, hybrid, and fully online courses. Conducting this exercise in person may look different in larger class sizes (e.g., with 45 learners or more) and require more prep from the instructor. With hybrid courses, creating room during out-of-class time for the review of the draft syllabus will be necessary, as with F2F, budgeting in class time will warrant the same type of consideration. For distance learning courses, this could be handled asynchronous or synchronous, yet also require planning from the instructor.

In addition to preparation, the type of assignments or activities that can be implemented based on the feedback from the activity will vary based on the method of instruction. Given that this course ran for six weeks, with three face-to-face meetings, politics related to participation were not fully explored. As illustrated by White (1996), participation is both a concept and practice (p.144), and it would be ideal to have a distinction of the type of participation this activity could yield (i.e., instrumental and/or representative versus nominal). A 15-week semester would yield more time for development compared to an even shorter term, such as 3- or 4-week accelerated terms. Finally, instructors are reminded to review and adhere to their program's guidelines for the assessment of student learning outcomes. The Council on Social Work Education's (2015) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards requires accredited programs to assess each of the nine social work competencies with two measures. Hence, prior to the syllabus exercise, instructors should identify the benchmarks necessary to measure and report assessment of student learning. As aforementioned, there are things that will limit the sharing of power, and this is one of them. Being able to have candid conversations about this during the activity may help with the power imbalance.

Discussion

Transformative participatory learning and the use of collaborative activities in social work education require that the instructor acknowledge their power and privilege as the facilitator (Mertens, 2007). This is an area that needs further investigation, as it relates to pedagogical practices, and development out into a richer exercise. If this activity was used as a form of evaluation, the positionality of the instructor would need to be assessed to account for variation in the instructor's perception of the outcomes of the activity compared to the learners' perceptions (e.g., Martin & Van Guten, 2002; Wager, 2014). Face-to-face versus online administration of this activity also needs further consideration to determine the advantages and disadvantages that participation play into the experience. While there is not much evidence to support that online learning can reduce certain biases, if the syllabus activity is used for any evaluative purposes, it will need to be modified. A way to address this is to use a summative evaluation of the activity. Summative feedback is another dimension that will add to this activity, as learners' input about their experience in engaging in the activity is paramount. Overall, student feedback post-class and post-course was encouraging. From the course evaluation feedback, a couple of comments were:

- “I like that way that she incorporated some things that we wanted to know and learn into the course.”
- “She encouraged everyone to participate.”
- “This professor is one of my favorites here at [redacted]. She … knows how to keep everyone engaged.”

Lastly, a formative assessment of the syllabus activity could be insightful for development and use as a pedagogical tool. Exploring a study design with courses where this activity takes place, including questions that reflect the observations based on changes to the syllabus, would be indicators of how learners adopted the syllabus. A systematic investigation of the syllabus activity could address the questions: What do we know about learners who assimilate to syllabi and course content quickly without question compared to those who need more time to process the course information or those who do not understand it, compared to those who helped create it?

The syllabus activity illustrates how instructors can address the power dynamic often experienced in the classroom through a transformative participatory experience. Learners are asked on the first day of class to participate in this activity, allowing for a shift in power for the course. Decentralizing power is an essential step to enhancing social work education and empowering learners to set up the course for their learning experiences, moving instructors from nominal participatory practices to more instrumental and representative practices.

This reflection contributes to a growing body of literature on participatory learning, critical pedagogy, and active engagement. While such anti-oppressive approaches are important, there remains a limited discourse in graduate education about instructional methodologies consistent with this perspective. Moreover, learners are voicing concern about the lack of expansive material and approaches in social work curriculum that address marginalization of not just client systems but also student populations. As Freire (2005) noted, higher education systems were originally designed to mirror an oppressive society; for example, “teacher knows everything and the students know nothing” or “teacher thinks and the students are thought about” (p. 13). The pursuit of anti-oppressive education challenges the hierarchical nature of academic spaces and processes in ways that can be uncomfortable for learners and instructors. Still, anti-oppressive social work education must promote that learners knowingly and critically think about themselves and the world. As a result, from the perspective of Freire, these learners may

> … perceive through their relations with reality that reality is really a process, undergoing constant transformation. If men and women are searchers and their ontological vocation is humanization, sooner or later they may perceive the contradiction in which banking education seeks to maintain them, and then engage themselves in the struggle for their liberation. (Freire, 2015, p. 75)

From anti-oppressive approaches, learners can also actualize behaviors consistent with professional competencies. This paper demonstrates how an anti-oppressive ideology using the syllabus activity with graduate students can possibly transform learners to have a more active and collaborative role in teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Graduate education has the capacity to pursue transformative pedagogical practices that benefit learners by way of inclusion and reflective practice. As researchers and educators continue to explore ways that graduate curricula contribute to the marginalization of student populations, we should also seek to answer what differences are made possible by using collaborative and participatory approaches. Graduate students continue to express feelings of unpreparedness and uncertainty soon after they enter the workforce (e.g., Tham & Lynch, 2017; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). By engaging learners in an activity such as the syllabus cloud, instructors model how to empower others by mitigating power imbalances, which is

a skill transferable to the workforce. Therefore, this exercise offers implications for social work programs to understand and apply participatory learning principles in preparation of doctoral students.

This paper has several limitations that readers should consider. Epistemology that demonstrates emancipatory potential was the focus for this teaching observation. As such, the authors chose to use a critical framework based on the contributions of multiple theorists and scholars, however, it is recognized that it is not without challenges as well as opportunities. To be noted is that this is only one position to take when examining relational dynamics between instructors and learners. There are other epistemological positions to contemplate when considering relationships that have hierarchical dynamics. There are several theories that can be included when examining underlying assumptions about life. A major criticism of critical theories is that they can present narrow rationales, mirroring the cultures they are seeking to change (Marzagora, 2016). For this reason, it would be important that in future observations and studies, scholars seek to use other theories to explore the influence, as there are multiple bodies of knowledge that support collaborative research in this area and can produce strong research and be successful. Another limitation is that while emancipatory paradigms are beneficial, they can fall short on challenging existing power structures (Kinsler, 2010). This is another area that will benefit from future inquiry, testing, and evaluation.

For future applications, instructors would need to consider how to accommodate class differences. One consideration would be to have a pre- and post-test to assess perceptions of power and relational dynamics. Including sociodemographic information of the learners would also be important as well as ranking and discipline for further analysis. An additional measure to consider would be on feelings of empowerment, as one of the goals of the activity is to embrace liberatory practices. Assessing how learners rate the activity and the outcomes of the course as a result of the activity would be important and insightful. For larger classes, instructors would need additional preparation to facilitate the activity and guide the students. Larger classes might consider using learning management systems to collect these suggested data as well as software to facilitate the cloud construction (i.e., programs like Padlet or live polling mechanisms). Additionally, learners would need reassurance that their level of engagement would not negatively impact their grade. Instructors would need to be creative in how they achieve this, yet it is important to consider for future applications. Lastly, considerations for online courses versus in-person classes would include budgeting time and levels of interaction.

This syllabus cloud activity demonstrates how to intentionally flatten power structures within a classroom to mitigate imbalances for learners. The activity, in the opinion of the authors, cultivates a collaborative learning environment that can lead to learner empowerment and increase participation and motivation for learning. By adopting this exercise, developing and current educators can become more effective instructors who model collaborative and liberatory approaches to education. Through this exercise, learners apply principles of critical thinking, reflective practice, and heightened awareness relative to their education. For educators who desire to provide adult learners with valuable skills that can be applied to learn anything, in academia, career, or life, we must be willing to support the process of learning in different ways and reject traditional, behavior-based pedagogies.

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