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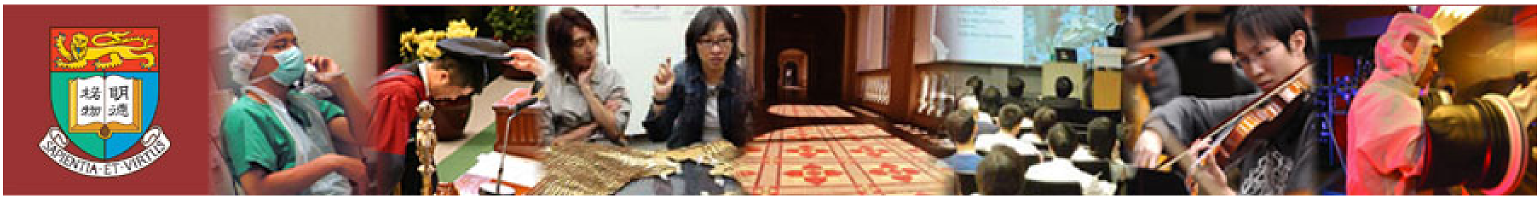

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Challenging Empty Signifiers in Search of Common Values: Collaborative Learning as Transformative Leadership

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Universities as organizations aspire to enable employees to capitalize on collective diversity, engaging in professional life with the benefit of insights that can extend beyond the sum of university parts (i.e., individuals' knowledge and skills). Collaborative inquiry into the nature of values in university education can lead to their clarification and strengthening, by applying "the same kinds of thought processes to…teaching," as we do to research (Healey, 2000, p. 172). However, in non-ideal (non-utopian, real-world) workplaces, the common feeling of busyness can alienate academics from one another; we become "too busy" to chat informally, for instance. "Values talk" related to educational activities in higher education is further discouraged by prioritization of apparently objective, often quantitative institutional measures of performance, of Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning (SETL). Against this backdrop recognizing education as value-laden, not only related to professional performance, but to personal and emotional development, can seem risky (Biesta, 2014; Tse, 1998), as SETL scores, for example, may not be related to the realization of particular educational values. Yet developing collaborative understanding of shared priorities such as core educational values remains crucial to effectively aligning teaching and learning practices to communal goals. Additionally, without identifying possibly shared values, faculty may feel alienated from personal experiences of vocation or calling, and from colleagues who may also face the same dilemma.

With the attempt to bring common educational values to light, a community can flesh out a distinctive, collaborative culture that can enable meaningful innovations in professional lives of educators. This paper reflects on one quest to elaborate the core educational values of a diverse group of education faculty and teacher educators at a major research-intensive university in Hong

Kong. The paper illustrates a rocky path, as the group attempts to clarify through multilayered and multifaceted depictions possible shared values, in search of an essence or core. It elaborates on this quest for common values as one of challenging what Laclau (1996) has described as "empty signifiers." Empty signifiers are terms that lack a clear, exclusive meaning. "Freedom" can serve as an example here. For some it can mean a Kantian lack of oppression and/or constraint, from external or internal forces which decrease autonomy, as in "Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" (1970). For others, it can indicate particular rights or capabilities (Berlin 2004; Sen, 1999). Empty signifiers are not *devoid* of meaning, but rather have multiple meanings, from understanding freedom's meaning within a primary school classroom context, to that of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, which U.S. President George W. Bush described as a war for freedom. Such different meanings have varying implications when it comes to implementing social programs and projects.

The existence of empty signifiers reveals that all voices are not equal in framing signification, as multiple meanings or outcomes, beneficial and detrimental to particular individuals and communities, can be associated with a word or phrase (e.g., "research assessment"). What makes a signifier *empty* in Laclau's (1996) view is when one meaning takes hold over others: "it is only by privileging the dimension of equivalence to the point that its differential nature is almost entirely obliterated—that is, emptying it of its differential nature—that the system can signify itself as a totality." Empty signifiers then constitute sites of contestation over ultimate meaning and significance. In the project discussed here, definitions and significations of "leadership," "evaluation," "review," "collegiality," "excellence," and "political education," became, through collaborative exploration, contested once again, and controversial: gaps were revealed between different institutions and individuals' claims of meaning, some of which were mutually contradictory. After sharing the case study, the paper concludes by reflecting on the following questions: Can the collaborative work of refilling these emptied terms in relation to shared professional values help constitute a more empowering, transformative leadership in higher education today? And if it can, could we systematize our good intentions to improve, not merely deconstruct, existing academic structures in non-ideal, real-world workspaces? Or are gaps over meaning better understood as inherent to a dynamic environment of collaborative learning for transformational, culturally and/or socially appropriate leadership?

The Quest for Core Values

An interest in clarifying and elaborating potential core values emerged within a community of professional educators after several group meetings where participants had explored such issues as the conflict between education as an economic, consumer service, versus an ethical calling, a major concern in Hong Kong, where private tutoring has enabled expectations among some students contradictory to the mission of university faculty (such as that professors be good looking or tell students "short cuts" to learning). Wondering firstly whether the group did indeed share particular educational values, participants constructed a plan to investigate the possibility and extent that they shared educational values, initially by conducting interviews with each participant on the following open-ended questions concerning student-teacher relationships in university education:

- What is your core value?
- What are your pedagogical principles?
- What strategies do you adopt to actualize the values and principles?

Twelve colleagues, across departments and disciplines in a large faculty of education, ultimately participated in interviews, with a research assistant (RA). Based on their responses, the RA compiled notes and created a list of 66 (anonymous) items (sentences or phrases) derived from colleagues' responses. Collectively, this provided a first impression of these colleagues' individual educational values. For instance:

- "[I] usually do not require a right answer. Try my best to engage them, to push them to think, reflect, relate, imagine…."

- “Teaching in many people’s eyes is increasingly becoming what they call technical rationality. Meanwhile, students no longer respect teachers that much.”
- “[The] student-teacher relationship should not be something that I have to nourish. I just be sure that I do not step on the toes of students, I am not doing anything that violates academic integrity…beyond that I am not the type that will try to please students….”
- “I do not believe in much lecturing. I do not like lecturing. I think that [the] teacher’s role is one of facilitator.”

How to proceed in further analysis of this information was a major topic of debate at the next group gathering. At first glance, it was clear that deducing from the collected reflections one essential or universal core would not be easy even if a shared thread existed. Responses to the questions varied greatly as can be seen above. Some responses to the questions addressed teaching practices, while others spoke to value concepts, or some combination of the two. Some seemed to respond to a framework or assumptions about what one’s core values might (otherwise) be. For instance the second reflection is influenced by recognition of a trend in education toward “technical rationality.” In the third example, the participant’s view of academic integrity is contrasted with trying “to please students,” distinguishing the latter from an alternative form of respectful connection with students.

Working as a team of diverse educational researchers to analyze this data revealed additional challenges perhaps inherent to efforts for diverse educators and researchers to work together in an authentic way. Bridging gaps in terms of divergent assumptions or attitudes toward research activity seemed a necessary first step to developing a collaborative culture across disciplinary boundaries, as knowledge-production practices within the academic subfields of education tend to be internally organized and not always mutually comprehensible. In this context the participants realized that “analysis” itself could act as an empty signifier, while the production of collaborative culture was something many participants wished to do without focusing on conflicts or disagreements.

Reflective of participants’ diverse backgrounds in quantitative and qualitative research, some preferred a ranking of items, to arrive at a final, most popular item or set of items from the list. Others wary of working with such fuzzy, subjective data had concerns about this, however; unlike a regular survey or questionnaire one would normally subject to ranking, not all items were clearly posed in terms of qualitative research design. On the other hand, subjective words like “respect,” “growth,” and “student needs,” can mean different things to people, particularly within a cross-cultural, international context. Such puzzles were also reflected on by the group as a possible hurdle for developing collaborative culture, while also representing a potential strength, if the group could continue to engage in a process that was not always harmonious to discover collective values they could not effectively ascertain in isolation from each other or through favoring one’s concepts over another’s at the outset.

The best way forward, given these challenges and the particularities of various educational research methodologies, seemed to be to deny the existence of a single best methodology for clarifying potential core values. The group thus moved forward with mixed methods. First, each participant rated each item on the previously mentioned 66-item list from 1-7 using a Likert scale for agreement/disagreement. Second, each gave a further elaboration of what they viewed as the collective core value of the group: “re-iterate the core values you believe we can and should pursue.” Once this further data was made anonymous and input into a master document (with twelve members’ responses), two participants engaged in a dialogical analysis of the document with the RA, examining points of repetition, in original items and new articulations, and exploring meanings in both. The two colleagues then developed a hypothesis about what language might best characterize and possibly expand upon the core values of the group. They spent time dialogically drawing examples based in practice which they hoped could resonate with colleagues, to avoid empty signification and add authentic meaning. They elaborated a philosophical conception, understanding that collectively satisfactory elucidations of core values did not easily unfold from quantitative methods, post-positivistic epistemologies, or simple statements. This process culminated with a gathering for more pointed collaborative theorizing about the core values of the group, discussed in the next section.

“Transformative Leadership”? A Hypothesis on Core Values

The next group session unfolded in three parts. First, the two “leaders” who had analyzed the collected findings asked each participant to give a two to three-minutes reflection, based on the total data of 66 items ranked by all participants, and second-stage reiterations, on the question, “For what are colleagues gathering in this [Teaching Development Grant] loop—what do we care most about beyond the individual space?” Participants were asked to prepare for this sharing before the group meeting. Second, the group leaders presented a hypothesis on core values for university education, elaborated as “transformative leadership.” To avoid presenting on empty signifiers, the presentation connected the leaders’ hypothesis with each participant’s voice, juxtaposing their visions. As the invitation to the session stated:

> Our approach to data goes beyond “analysis,” as we want to generate a progressive discourse for further discoveries. We shall leap from the “I” and “my core values” to an exploration of the “we” and “our core values” to interpret what we can collectively aim for with the scope of self-enhancement within and beyond the project space.

Third, participants made critical, constructive, reflective, and reiterative responses to the main presentation. This section of the paper discusses these processes as findings within one case of developing collaborative culture for professional development in higher education, reflective of an attempt to go beyond single discourses, research methods, or presentation styles—to develop and articulate something collective that cannot be sufficiently defined by one scholarly discourse or way of knowing.

1. *Roundtable articulation*

First each participant was asked to consider the group’s data of ranked values from the 66-item list and the additional, anonymous reiterations, and respond to the question, “For what are colleagues gathering…what do we care most about beyond the individual space?” Knowing the session would involve “transformative leadership” (which was given in the title of the meeting as advertised in the faculty) but little else about what was meant or to be discussed as such, participants’ in-session reflections connected well with the understanding the group leaders had dialogically constructed (discussed in the next sub-section), representing a form of validation of interpretations of participants’ voices as gleaned from the data. Key points included:

- We don’t want to just be experts, but we want to be recognized as *growing* individuals with diverse abilities and experiences.
- We want teaching and learning to be based on learning outcomes that are defined for *our particular situations* and benefit both instructors and students.
- We want to teach *for life and society,* not because it’s just part of our job.
- There is a conflict between rhetoric and reality for teachers and students:
    - Teachers face practical concerns related to outcomes-based approaches to learning as seeming barriers to enabling learni*ng objects that are harder to define and test,* while,
    - Students need to get good grades, but this may conflict with their gaining *deep or meaningful knowledge* and learning *experiences*.
- We face *fear* related to the conflicts we face as professionals, due to time scarcity (“We have to protect our *own* time,” versus, “What’s for the good of students?”).

In the roundtable sharing it seemed what was stated by any individual resonated to some extent with the rest, as a reflection of the collaboration across the boundaries of our diverse day-to-day lives, challenges, and activities. Physical nods relating confirmation and recognition of each other’s points and visual mind mapping of the exercise on a white board further articulated connections of views, as individual perspectives appeared to be collectively held over time, through continued discussion. The presentation that followed aimed to provide new resources extending common themes, drawing upon the roundtable sharing as well as the data to further elaborate on what notion of professional identity aligns with the group's core values.

2. The hypothesis of "transformative leadership"

The main presentation began with an acknowledgement of the concrete challenges participants faced to develop a truly collaborative culture. As mentioned previously, a variety of categories made up the 66 items of core values, from classroom practices, to educational goals, and responses to oppositional discourses. Some words or phrases seemed to have similar meanings, or reflect or articulate similar concepts in different ways, while at the same time one word may have different meanings as elaborated upon. The "leaders" also signaled awareness of the limitations of the term "leadership." In research and everyday practice, leadership means different things depending upon whom you ask. Whether leadership should be understood in a strong, authoritarian, hierarchical sense, or as a matter of efficient or wise delegation of authority, was debatable in the culturally diverse community: Could leadership be related to ethics and values considerations, or was it trapped within neoliberal discourses of managing the performance of workers?

Likewise, the leaders recalled a discussion around "responsibility" the group previously held. "Responsibility" speaks both to something the participants as professional educators want to take, own, and define as part of a vocation or calling, in connection with a desire to be autonomous and do ethical work. However, responsibility also can be conflated when one is feeling cynical with "accountability," as discussed in technical-rational views of education as a performance of a service, with students as customers who provide their feedback to employers through SETL (Cuthbert, 2010). The group had debated earlier whether this term could be reclaimed, or must now connote such discourses of accountability to stakeholders, at variance with a devotion to education that aligns with participants' values.

In the group's work in the past, such language often appeared to threaten the ability to develop collaborative culture and define a common core, as participants struggled to conceptually move beyond everyday practices at distance from their sense of their ethical values, to imagine a more appropriately value-laden work environment. Furthermore, as the group had discussed previously, it was alarming to observe how an originally good idea, such as that educators should have "outcomes" present in mind while planning lessons, could become corrupted when taken as a fundamental law or rule of performance apart from other interests, such as teaching for deep understanding, which does not necessarily lend itself to the basic, reductive language of institutional outcomes assessment processes. Whether participants felt empowered to devote themselves to positive intentions, rather than non-ideal workplace realities of leadership, responsibility, and outcomes, seemed dependent upon social contexts. Thus, values talk seemed at times to be at odds with implementing meaningful cultural development as transformational leaders in a systematic way.

Next, the presentation reflected on some of the highest ranked values from the 66-item list (emphases from the presentation):

> 51. "I would say that my value is critical thinking. I want my students to develop tools through their university education to help them to build *reflective understanding about their lives,* actions, limitations, and possibilities."
>
> 32. "Usually I consider the teaching and learning process as a mutual development. I consider *teacher as also learner* and at the same time the students, are also basically learners, but they are going to learn to be teachers as well. So we are *helping each other* in this direction."
>
> 60. "Encourage writing and reading, not to be good students or get a good grade, but to make the learning *meaningful* to your life."

Other ranked values (paraphrased) reflected similar emphases:

- *We learn* from each other.
- *Mutual respect* for students, their work, and their *choices*.
- Treat students *as humans, with emotions, dignity, and respect*.

- Co-own something *we do together* with students to *develop new understanding*.
- Teachers as *facilitators* that *learn together* with students.
- Teaching *facilitates growth* of students to enhance their well-being.
- *Student individuality*.

Core value reiterations were summarized as follows:

- Transform societal values.
- Teach in the best way for students and ourselves.
- Education for individual growth.
- Education for student empowerment.
- Stay human, real; don't just follow rules.
- Education as a process between students and teachers: a relationship.

As the group leaders found that values terms required elucidation in practical contexts to be useful toward the development of a richer or more transformative collaborative culture, they then proceeded in an analysis with a contextualizing question that seemed to underpin so many articulations of core values: *How can we define our relationship with students and education*? As an initial response, the leaders hypothesized a particular sense of *transformative leadership* as a potential characterization of the group's core value, defining key features of the role of a university educator. First, the form of leadership was characterized as *dialogic*. The leader in this view is not a "strong man," or leader by seniority, hierarchy, or power, but was seen as a kind of facilitator. By virtue of participants' positions as educators they have a leadership role, and a responsibility within classrooms. However, this does not mean that educators know everything. "Teaching" was also contrasted with "educating," with the former term corresponding to the idea of teachers having knowledge and training students for occupations, while the latter was connected with learning for life: facilitating knowledge construction to make life more meaningful.

Transformation was discussed as a necessary description for the leadership concept. The participants wanted to transform students, seeing education as based upon whole-person development, and students as lifelong learners. At the same time, participants also saw themselves as dynamic learners, not just educators, who wished to work with students in value-laden, real-life contexts—not in isolation from life's demands and realities. Participants also expected to be transformed by such an education, viewing their classes as life labs, rather than as sterile, static classrooms of abstract knowledge. To further elaborate, the group leaders invoked Paulo Freire's distinction between "banking education" and education as praxis in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1989). There, banking education is characterized in the following terms:

(a) The teacher teaches and students are taught;
(b) Teacher knows everything, the students nothing;
(c) Teacher thinks, students are thought about;
(d) Teacher talks, students listen—meekly;
(e) Teacher disciplines, students are disciplined; and
(f) Teacher chooses content, student adapt. (Freire, 1989).

This view of education, described by Freire in the context of colonial education of rural farmers in Brazil in the 1960s, is commonly understood (in our group) as a *traditional* view of education (traditional not only in Brazil, but in Hong Kong, among other societies). Here the teacher is a leader in a strong sense. Student knowledge or experience is not valued, as the teacher prescribes *a priori* what matters. This view is one that the group meant to work against, in developing collaborative core values for a more innovative educational practice.

Against banking education, Freire (1989) defines "pedagogy of the oppressed" as problem-posing education to help students in everyday life. Freire further describes it as an education that regards students as "humans," and not just "students," in line with differentiations made in the group which repeatedly emphasized the world outside the classroom as meaningful to the work of educators. Such a conception recognizes that students have valuable knowledge and understanding, and that one should not teach from outside their worlds, as in banking education. “Praxis” is a core piece of this puzzle. Praxis involves students and teachers deciding in dialogue what is valuable, and what their goals are with respect to teaching and learning: the outcomes of education. In exploring praxis, Freire discusses “generative themes” as real-world topics upon which to base inquiry, with education as a dialogue or social construction of knowledge about something important to both the teacher and student: something about which both know something about, and wish to know more. In praxis, teachers are “teacher-students,” while students are viewed as “student-teachers,” an idea of interrelation echoed in our roundtable discussion of our desire to see teachers as students and students as teachers of each other.

The group leaders reflected that much of this philosophy corresponded nicely with the group’s quest. However, they also wished to push the discourse into deeper territory, adding new concepts for group engagement, to consider as elaborations to further define collective views for or against. They found further discussions by Freire of praxis interesting for this purpose. In discussing praxis, Freire describes how students, conceived as oppressed, can be reconceived and enabled as more fully and richly human by their teachers. At the same time, he argues that the “oppressed” students are also responsible for saving or liberating the “oppressors,” seen here as the teachers (1989). Here, educators are not merely oppressors, but also are oppressed in a sense, within the system. A dialogical, mutual empowerment thus takes place with praxis, among different groups of “oppressed.” Students must identify teachers as human and vice versa for transformational education to transpire.

Educators, then, can only free themselves from alienating conflicts, such as about protecting one’s time versus serving students, by rejecting a conception of education that oppresses teachers and students alike. This process demands educators treat students as human, not as part of a “system”:

> They call themselves ignorant and say the “professor” is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen. The criteria of knowledge imposed upon them are the conventional ones…
>
> Within their inauthentic view of the world and of themselves, the oppressed feel like “things” owned by the oppressor…. (Freire, 1989).

The group leaders asked participants whether such abstract, political language might relate to the group’s quest, or if such an interpretation stretched beyond what was truly shared. They suggested that Freire’s philosophy might be further understandable to the group as a kind of response to a question explored previously by participants: whether students should be seen as customers. A paper describing students as customers discussed in a past gathering was recalled here, which was a likely source of push-back in some articulations of core values that were critical, for instance, of “technical rationality.” As Cuthbert (2010) put it, students can be seen as “co-producers of learning and knowledge,” in a discourse connecting “modern marketing thinking with modern scholarship on teaching and learning” (pg. 22). In Cuthbert’s view (2010), such a discourse provides students with new rights, to participate in curriculum design, development, and delivery; to engage as co-producers; and to reconceive quality teaching. Against this backdrop, the group leaders raised further questions connecting this past discussion to the day’s notion of transformative leadership:

> What is missing in such an analysis of higher education?
>
> Do students want to be customers?
>
> Would you want to be a customer?
>
> If we start outside this discourse of Cuthbert, of “modern scholarship on teaching and learning,” and “modern marketing thought,” then what? Do we arrive somewhere else?
>
> Can our vision for education be outside “modern” marketing and teaching/learning?
>
> What does “modern” mean?

Before ending, the group leaders offered a brief reply: Modernity might symbolize, in the discussion of students as customers, economic development, as “modernity” often is equated with the industrial revolution. Against Cuthbert’s argument, they questioned whether good ideas about education emerged only in modern times; diverse educational philosophies of dialogue and individual development, from Socrates to Confucianism, have been significant throughout human history, and such traditions of thought should not be dismissed by narrow economic thinking. They concluded the point by emphasizing as core values the collective desire to educate rather than *deliver products,* or *coproduce products* with students, and to help students in a way that goes beyond a narrow economic view of education for human capital.

The presentation ended with a question: *How can we depict our relationships?* Though an attempt was made to define core values, the group leaders admitted they were still left with many questions and few solutions. Reflecting on the journey as a whole, they presented as a concluding idea a metaphor symbolizing humility they gained overall through the quest: an image of an iceberg, with one point raised above the surface of the water. As they expressed, the symbol illustrated that there are parts one cannot know and are still difficult to see even after rigorous, restless examination. Similarly they raised the metaphor of an elephant in the room, which none can see perfectly. Through continuous, generous discussion, one can better understand some parts of it, but the whole is not visible. Such imagery speaks to an epistemology that is social constructivist rather than positivist or post-positivist when it comes to understanding core values within a collaborative culture. One can see some representations and reflections, but as a whole they are ungraspable while culture is non-static. To accept or appreciate this aspect of the quest is to acknowledge that when we try to see things in a new way, differently from the norm of our professional environment where we work independently and aim to avoid tension, the discovery process may not be immediately forthcoming. The collaboration revealed that there is much we do not know or cannot yet see as a whole. This does not mean we should not try to know and see more.

3. *Responses*

In view of the tip of the iceberg, voices responding to the presentation urged the team leaders away from the politics shaping Freire’s thought, to their own context. While many resonated with some of Freire’s ideas—particularly the notion that the teacher is not an “oppressor,” but also can be seen as part of the “oppressed,” within a socioeconomic view of our work—the Brazilian philosopher had little to say to specific situations in Hong Kong, to shape a view of university educators’ potential agency or actions in this contemporary social and cultural context. Freire himself wrote at length that he could not be exported from his Marxist origins, and Brazilian agricultural backdrop, which was his daily life, but not everyone’s (Macedo & Freire, 2005). Agreement was widespread, however, that the quest for core values did result in a quest to depict relationality, to each other and with students, another aim in developing collaborative culture. The group concluded without a final decision about transformative leadership or a successive conceptualization of its core values, but with a sense of further building toward an understanding to empower the community and those beyond it.

Challenging Empty Signifiers

This narrative reveals one case study of the attempt to develop collaborative culture in higher education and professional teaching development. In this quest, providing collective challenges to “empty signifiers,” as terms with contested meanings in non-ideal (that is, ordinary and non-utopian) environments was a significant aspect of aiming to develop teaching based on ethical values apart from other workplace concerns, of performance rather than development. Such was the case, as seen in the discussion, with “responsibility,” which can have meanings related to external accountability and/or vocation and sense of calling. In the narrative above, “leadership,” “responsibility,” and “political education” emerged as empty signifiers the group sought to challenge—to reimagine and idealize, rather than accept in non-ideal, mundane workplace realities, where they become something different, unsatisfactory, and problematic.

“Political education” particularly emerged in discussing Freire’s work as a difficult term to use, invoking protests, occupy movements, and rebellion, rather than the sense of personal and collective empowerment of students and teachers, which the group sought to enable.

In line with the challenge of the empty signifier of educational responsibility (in relation to outcomes-based education), issues with “evaluation” and “review” emerged. SETL dominated participants’ conceptions of teaching assessment and development as articulated in institutional discourses (in seminars and professional development workshops). Participants wanted to push against this emptying of professional teacher development. SETL was seen in periods of reflection as inviting the sort of consumeristic, modern-economic approach to education they sought to push against and protest as they identified core values shared also with students about teaching and learning. As participants attested, SETL was poorly equipped to identify education as a practice where one should work with personal and/or shared values. Its anonymous format and consumer orientation seems to invite unfair criticisms of educators, in worst cases based on their appearances, or other aspects which cannot be reasonably held as changeable about individuals. (Participants reflected on receiving comments from students “to change the teacher” for the course, for example, or to find more attractive instructors!) Though values like respect, relevance, responsibility, and relationships were seen as important to students and participants, SETL was devoid of references to such things.

In relation, participants discussed the possibility of rethinking reliance on SETL in the faculty as a measure for teaching development and introducing a peer evaluation/review system. Yet naming an alternative system proved nearly impossible, as every available term was seen by some participants to provide an insufficient challenge to dominating empty signifiers. “Evaluation” and “review” were viewed as tools that might be difficult to repurpose from the master’s work-shed, as participants envisioned worst-case scenarios of colleagues holding each other hostage to competing values in the faculty in such a peer review framework. As participants envisioned alternatives to SETL as bases for professional teaching development, they were also wary that faculty members outside the group might see them as offering another empty signifier in place of SETL, which could be as or more problematic.

In a larger faculty discussion, “excellence” and “collegiality” were discussed as key faculty themes, which were reflected upon by participants in excited, hopeful, but also cautious and cynical tones. In particular, the two terms were seen to conflict with each other as they are reshaped by large-scale, apparently top-down, faculty conversations, into empty signifiers: one of care and interrelation, and the other connoting a competitive “survival of the fittest” performative mindset, which discarded value considerations in light of the demands for productivity, as seen in RAE and SETL. That collegiality takes time away from the individualistic quest for excellence, was apparent to participants throughout the project, as they endured SETL, RAE, and related audits and reviews in the name of excellence as psychological and interpersonal barriers to the time-consuming and yet seemingly timely quest for developing a collaborative, value-oriented culture.

Developing collaborative culture through transformative leadership is thus revealed here as an act of challenging empty signifiers continually, sustaining a creative and productive bridging of gaps, that is not tension-free but necessary for playing a role in a united manner in the higher education workplace today. Rather than working in an environment where mistrust reigns, developing a culture of collaboration enables one to create a healthy discursive and professional space to explore the non-ideal—that is, real life—work experience, wherein systems of accountability and bureaucracy can be otherwise alienating, enabling silencing of distinct, critical voices. By collaborating, colleagues transform leadership by challenging a managerial sense of the term, of organizing people for accounting purposes. Whether this will lead to a new ideal vision becoming reality may not be possible, as collaboration requires dynamic interpersonal engagement to continue and be sustained, and such collaboration will inevitably lead to new voices and perspectives shifting and changing the nature of what can be counted not as empty signifiers, but as collective core values. Thus, it seems likely such tensions encountered are inherent to collaborative learning for transformational leadership. Indeed, challenging the conflation of "tensions" with "problems" or "issues," can also be seen in this case to require sustained commitment to collaboration, as bridging gaps that otherwise grow is essential for developing a collaboratively shaped value-oriented practice.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to represent and reflect on a collaborative process of diverse university educators asking: What are a diverse group's core values? What connects them in educative tasks beyond the individual space—as *human* educators, not just "teachers"? The path as reflected upon here was not straightforward, and was made with echoes, reiterations, and reflective articulations, as participants sought to learn from communication within a collaborative group. No path was available but the path created through trial and error, conflict and contradiction, as a culture grows as more than the sum of its parts (the individual experiences of education faculty). Thus this paper is not a monologue on transformative leadership, or the values of collaboration, but a dialogue of a group building something from a previous thin layer of collegiality among peers across departments, disciplines, and cultures.

We have core values, connected to relationality with students, and practice that does not just train students for work, but prepares them for life. By reflecting on such core values, the need to articulate the relationship with students emerges, while core values remain like an elephant without a name: a tail, ears, legs, and tusks. As work in developing collaborative culture, the value of this exercise depends not upon the external validity of "transformational leadership," but upon whether participants now better understand themselves in unity and with students. Our relationship with students is significant from any orientation to our profession. However, this project is also based upon the premise that diversity brings benefits, even if it does not invite practical strategies to enable learning outcomes, or positive student-teacher evaluations. Thus if we aim to better understand our values, as a collaborative culture, we may be contented to grow in moments of knowledge crystallizing aspects of unity, while at the same time identifying challenges related to methods, data, and results, as reflections of what collaboration entails in areas of life we usually experience as soloists. Challenging empty signifiers continually despite the tensions emerges as inherently significant and worthwhile to this process.

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