

## **Social Work in 2021: Community and Collaborative Learning**

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As I prepare to return in person after nineteen virtual months, I am nervously anticipating what my classroom will look like, sound like, and feel like. It will be important to create a sense of community and to teach relationally by holding space for myself and my students (Hollingrake et al., 2019). We also return with different experiences of collective trauma and as active participants in an ever-evolving pandemic story (Kuchuck, 2021). I imagine my classroom being one with masked and socially distant students entering with anxiety. I imagine it will sound like community building exercises in a blended classroom. I hope it will feel like a joint experience, one where all our identities and experiences can be present.

### **BRIDGING EXPERIENCES**

Back in 2009, I started my work at Mott Haven Academy Charter School in the South Bronx. I learned to lead five-year-olds in lessons about emotions and adults in lessons about attachment and trauma. It is also during this time that I learned about anti-racist education and culturally responsive pedagogy, both central to my teaching of Social Work at New York University Silver School of Social Work. When COVID-19 shut Mott Haven Academy down in March of 2020, I was responsible for continuing to lead students in social emotional learning and adults in their learning. When I started preparing for an online start to my NYU classes in the fall of 2020, I knew I was going to have to work on developing community among strangers. It is impossible in a short essay to describe all elements of my online classroom and if I did, I would be taking the credit for the strength my MSW students and their clients showed this year. However, for the sake of describing my pedagogy pre and post virtual learning, I will highlight a few purposeful techniques I used to build community online.

### **CREATING A COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY**

#### **Joy and Identity**

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020) pushes us to approach our classrooms by centering culturally responsive literacy. She wants us to ask our students how they define themselves, how the world defines them, and who they want to be in the future. Though her work is geared towards PK-8 education, I find great parallels to the Higher Education classroom. Abolitionist

educator Dr. Bettina Love (2019) speaks of the importance of recognizing and celebrating Black joy and coming together in solidarity for increased empathy (Love, 2019, p.120). Dr. Love and Dr. Muhammad were central in my online teaching this past year, and I used activities to bring their teachings to life.

Prior to the semester I asked students to submit a song for a class playlist to start off our class. While we played that song, I encouraged a digital share, along the lines of; “What brought you joy this week?”, “How did you recently take care of yourself first?”, and “What’s your favorite way to eat rice?”. These simple questions, all answered in the chat box, allowed students to ground themselves and learn about each other while listening to their playlist. Then after quick announcements, we engaged in 20 minutes of identity exercises. Drawn from the work of Muhammad (2020), we shared the story of our names in pairs, brought in cultural artifacts to share in small groups, explored the salient pieces of our identities that offer us privilege or are oppressed by using identity maps, and wrote poetry. We used Google features such as Jamboard and Google Docs for the purposes of these activities, though a pen and paper option was always offered. Jamboards proved to be a simple and fun tool for activities. These activities were used to build community and to model activities students could use with clients. Afterwards, I built in five-seven minutes in small groups to process. I never joined those groups and trusted that they would use the time for what they needed at that moment, either following the specific prompt I posed or holding space for one another. The time to create community and grounding before engaging in conversations about practice were essential and will continue this fall.

## Gallery Walks

The anxiety students were experiencing this year made it imperative to meet them where they were in their learning, and they were not in a place where long lectures were going to be effective. In previous teaching and at Mott Haven, we often used Gallery Walks to push collaboration and critical thinking. A Gallery Walk is an interactive, collaborative learning tool that is used to promote discussion (Elizabeth et al., 2020). During a Gallery Walk, questions or quotes are posted around the classroom on chart paper. Students walk around the classroom silently, commenting on and engaging with each other through comments. This fifteen-minute activity is an excellent tool to promote higher order thinking (Elizabeth et al., 2020) and is followed by a debrief. I wanted to continue this practice online as I find that it brings forward voices I have not yet heard from, allows students to think critically before responding, and gives opportunity for students to examine and elaborate on existing perspectives. In the fall 2020, we worked collectively on an analysis of Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* to draw connections between the Civil Rights Movement, the 2020 election, and our role as Social Workers. I was able to use Google Docs to replicate an online version of the Gallery Walk with all of us reading and commenting at the same time. It was a powerful experience, and I will absolutely continue the practice of Gallery Walks as we reenter the classroom.

## USE OF QUESTIONS TO PUSH ANTI-RACIST PRACTICE

As a White educator, I am developing my anti-racist pedagogy in which implicit and explicit instruction is used to challenge individual thoughts and the societal structures within which we operate (Blackeney, 2005). I am exploring ways we can push the instruction of White students to make sure all students are ready to go into the field and dismantle the inequities of our systems. This year, I used assignments to encourage personal reflection and as a way to engage with students. Chew et al. (2021) recommend the use of questioning to promote discussion in the anti-racist classroom and for the teacher to take a facilitator role. I have always been very structured in my expectations of assignments, grading with a pre-developed rubric I share with students and using comments to push critical thinking, and Google Docs allows for a great collaboration and sharing of ideas through comments. Due to the lack of face-to-face contact, the practice of using assignment feedback to connect with students was imperative. I also used comments to share my own experiences and bring forward my identity. Questions I asked both in the assignment and through feedback included: How are you dismantling inequities within your sphere of influence? How did you celebrate the joy of your client? How are you honoring each part of their identity and allowing them to show up authentically? What are you reading by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) authors to push your thinking? How are you making sure that you are working with the client according to Restorative Justice principles (Davis, 2019)? This feedback loop with all students will continue in the Fall as I found that there was a spirit of collaboration and community that came about from this online discussion platform.

## CONCLUSION

This experience has taught me that it is imperative for me to center a collaborative, community building approach in my classrooms. Now more than ever, students benefit from a classroom that allows them to bring forward their identities and pushes them to approach their work with some of the same principles. While this was always important to me in my teaching, I found the creative use of online tools encouraged community building in the online space and I will continue to use them as we are back in person. Despite the challenges of the past year, I am hopeful we can take the lessons learned and purposefully frame them to create authentic learning experiences.

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