

The Co-created Annotated Bibliography Assignment as an Equitable and Inclusive Practice

Alison Cook-Sather

Bryn Mawr College

I have been a faculty member in the Education Department at Bryn Mawr College for nearly three decades. Over these years, I have moved from teacher-driven development of course content and modes of engagement to what I practice currently: co-creation with students. When I recently revisited syllabi from courses I taught in the 1990s, I found reading lists I had curated and teacher-devised structures through which I invited students to engage. I focus in this discussion on an example of an assignment in an undergraduate education course that illustrates how far I have moved away from this teacher-centered approach to generating and engaging with course content.

This assignment, the co-created annotated bibliography, is one of several in a course that was originally called “Advocating for Diversity in Higher Education.” I spent a full semester in 2015 co-creating all aspects of this course with then-undergraduate Crystal Des Ogugua. Our goal was to create class structures and assignments that would support bringing students’ diverse lived experiences and interests into dialogue with published educational theory and analyzing the structures in higher education that hinder the realization of commitments to equity and inclusion (see Cook-Sather, 2022, for a detailed discussion of this process). Ceding sole authority of what the course would look like and how students would engage it, I wrestled with feeling as though I was abnegating my responsibility as an instructor and, in particular, that the students’ learning might suffer if I did not bring my expertise to bear in selecting the course readings. I learned through letting go of those notions of authority and control that I could use my expertise differently—to provide structures and spaces within which students could develop their own expertise as they draw in a far wider diversity of sources than I could ever gather on my own (Cook-Sather, 2022).

Prior to co-creating this course, I had not only chosen course readings on my own but also typically assigned the same readings to all enrolled students and led most discussions of those texts during class time. I see these practices now as mistakenly conflating asking everyone to do the same thing with embracing an equitable and inclusive approach. I had not questioned an inherited belief in the authority, and responsibility, of the professor to curate a set of crucial readings. I had also not questioned the need for me to define the terms according to which knowledge might be explored and generated. And finally, I had not questioned the lack of trust in students that these beliefs imply, despite having developed with a secondary teacher colleague in 1995 a project based in the secondary teaching methods course in our Education Department that centers secondary students' voices in teacher preparation (Cook-Sather, 2002). It took co-creating an entire course to more fully shift to co-creating components of it.

The co-created, annotated bibliography assignment, like other assignments and practices in the course, aims to foster a sense of inclusion and belonging for a wide variety of students (see Cook-Sather et al., 2017, for a discussion of a different assignment). To give us a shared starting point each week, all enrolled students complete one common reading or viewing, sometimes proposed by me, sometimes proposed by students. Then, instead of completing additional shared weekly readings, each student selects a piece—a text, a TED Talk, or some other source—to read, view, or listen to. I provide a set of sources for students to choose from, but most students seek out their own sources that speak to their particular interests in relation to the course themes. Through this co-creation approach, I am no longer the sole authority selecting texts.

Furthermore, instead of my posing questions to guide students through a common reading in preparation for class, each enrolled student writes an annotation of the source they selected and posts that every Monday to the co-created annotated bibliography on our course management system (Moodle). The annotations need not be traditionally academic. Rather, students write short, informal summaries, select key quotations, and include the full reference, so students have dozens of sources to learn from. Finally, instead of my leading students through

discussions of these selections, students spend a portion of class time each week in groups of three or four discussing the pieces they selected, how those connect to course themes, and what they can learn from what others in their small group have read, watched, or listened to. This approach trusts students' choices and powers to make meaning, unlike my previous approaches, which centered me as facilitator of the interpretative process.

This assignment has transformed how students and I understand individual and shared accountability in learning content and creating an equitable and inclusive classroom environment. One student described the weekly contributions to this co-created annotated bibliography as “very good tools for holding myself accountable to educating myself,” and another noted that everyone contributing a variety of topics to the collection of annotations created “a more inclusive environment.” Drawing on students’ final portfolios, in which they analyze their engagement through the various course assignments, I offer several important lessons that I take from this approach and that affirm my move from a teacher-driven to a co-creation approach.

First, the co-created, annotated bibliography enacts a form of culturally responsive practice. As one student writes:

I didn't realize the importance of the annotated bibliography until we read about culturally responsive classrooms and materials. I think the annotated bibliography is such a wonderful example of practicing culturally responsive pedagogy, because it allows students to bring in topics that they are interested in and they felt are relevant. The small group discussion further allowed us to bring these culturally responsive knowledge and materials from virtual space to classroom discussion.

Second, this assignment is responsive to student interest and capacity at any given moment, affording them the opportunity to make intentional and meaningful choices for themselves and for what they contribute. This is relevant on multiple levels of lived experience—the emotional/affective, the intellectual, the intersectional, and the logistical/practical. In one

student's words: "I appreciated having the designated space for individual exploration because in many classes I have new interests and questions that arise and I feel like I can't devote any time to them." Another student notes that "it was an empowering experience" to be able to select resources they "could handle for each particular week."

Third, an assignment such as this can contribute to transforming students' conceptions and experiences from individual isolation to co-creation in higher education more broadly. One student asserts:

Before taking [this course], my experience with annotated bibliographies was strictly a class assignment. A document that only a professor could access, attaching its worth to a grade. However, having co-created a classroom library of rich resources was beyond rewarding. I was very intentional about focusing on my raw personal reflections instead of feeling the pressure to follow a formula or produce deep analysis. The point was to share resources and provide an annotation where my classmates could get a feel for the topic and an insight into my thinking. Reading other people's findings was interesting and quickly solidified that while we all share one classroom space, we possess a wide range of interests to learn from.

Another student muses:

The annotated bibliography is a great example of the conceptual shift away from competition and towards collaboration. In the first week, it didn't really cross my mind to read through other students' annotations....However, when we shared our insights from the bibliography during class, I began to understand the purpose of this assignment. Through this activity, I started to view my classmates as valuable resources for learning, growth, and co-creation.

The diversity of students' interests and the empowerment they experience through having choice and agency have proven to be far more important than my controlling course content and conversations. Therefore, because this assignment is inclusive of students' diverse

identities and interests, responsive to their shifting capacities and commitments, and attentive to the complex intersections of individual and collective accountability, I will continue to use the structure and space the collaborative annotated bibliography offers in the course, which was renamed “Exploring and Enacting Transformation of Higher Education” by enrolled and former students in 2021. The co-created annotated bibliography assignment supports the central commitment behind my work as an educator and ongoing learner at this point in my career: to structure student voice into higher education with the goal of co-creating equitable teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, 2022).

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References

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