

NURTURING THE “WHOLE PERSON”: THE LEARNING COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE AS A SAFE SPACE

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It is fall quarter 2003 and forty-one students¹ have signed up for an evening coordinated studies course at North Seattle Community College. The first night of any coordinated studies course is typically the same—students sitting quietly at their desks waiting patiently to be told what is expected of them. There is little personal interaction, no small talk. The room is quiet; the students are separated and subdued. It is something that we, as the instructors, hope will change as a result of their participation in this learning community.

This change—from passive, separated learners to engaged, even excited, learners—is something we believe will happen organically *if* we can provide the right balance of academic rigor and relational community-building ingredients. The purpose of this article is to share three practices that we have learned to incorporate into our learning community if we want to foster this kind of holistic or “whole person” learning experience for students and ourselves.

Beginnings has been offered at NSCC, both a day and evening section, as part of the fall integrated studies course offerings for the last several years, and was specifically designed to offer support for new and returning students to the community college experience. This year’s course theme is *Beginnings: Finding Our Voice, Communicating with Each Other through Stories* and it is being taught by a full-time English faculty member and a part-time Communications faculty member. This coordinated studies course combines composition, multicultural literature, intercultural communication, and a survey of basic communication competency (interpersonal, small group communication, and oral presentation) for a total of twelve credit hours.

The course’s learning goals are directly linked to the college’s student learning outcomes. The course’s uniqueness, however, is shaped by both instructors’ shared personal belief and historical faith in the “transformative” learning experience where the development of an intellectually *and* emotionally safe community is as important as academic rigor. We have found that when we are able to create this

delicate mix of openness to new ideas and high academic standards with opportunities for honesty, personal voice, and reflection, the learning experience provides all participants, students and teachers, with surprising moments of wisdom and learning. It is as if this mixture creates an academic womb that nourishes and fosters growth for all.

As educators, our belief and trust in the creation of safe learning spaces has been influenced by the women's movement, in particular by the academic research and writings of Carol Gilligan and Mary Field Belenky, who have written about the development of women's voices and the creation of "public homeplaces," and also from our own extensive involvement in reflective practices and women's circles. Our understanding of a safe space very much mirrors Mary Field Belenky, Lynne Bond, and Jacqueline Weinstock's definition of a "public homeplace":

Public homeplaces are places where people support each other's development and where everyone is expected to participate in developing the homeplace. Using the homeplace as a model, the members go on working to make the whole society more inclusive, nurturing, and responsive to the developmental needs of all people—but most especially to those who have been excluded and silenced. (1999, 13)

As we began to plan our course to support our theme of story, voice, and identity, we intentionally designed an eclectic blend of assignments for the students to interact with: regular reading and writing about the texts that were discussed in weekly seminars and writing workshops; practicing a variety of multicultural, small group, and interpersonal communication exercises; listening to different guest speakers; watching an assortment of videos; participating in a group research project and giving an oral presentation; and finally, submitting a final individual portfolio coupled with a self-evaluation. This last assignment gave students an opportunity to reflect on their experience in the course, on the knowledge they developed, and the skills they improved in the areas of writing, reading, group work, research, and communication (interpersonal, multicultural, and public presentation).

The texts we chose were critical to the course. Because we believed it was important to provide a cultural framework that would support a rich discussion on the process of learning about our own identities, and provide a way to share our own stories, we chose: *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, a theoretical text on white privilege by Allan Johnson

(a white, heterosexual male); *Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality, and Identity*, a cultural identity memoir written by David Mura (a Japanese American male); and three cultural novels—*Dreaming in Cuban* by Christina Garcia (a Cuban American female), *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich (a Native American female), and *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor (an African American female).

Practicing Honesty

Our first step towards intentionally creating an inclusive and safe learning community was honesty. We began with the hypothesis that we don't know each other's cultures and stories, and asked why. We started with white privilege and racism. By the end of the first week of class, we had watched the highly intense video “The Color of Fear” (the first of the two videos by filmmaker Lee Mun Wah, a nationally known diversity consultant and “community” therapist), discussed Peggy McIntosh's article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” and read Allan Johnson's book on white privilege. These three choices immediately forced us as an entire class to see, discuss, and listen to the painful impact racism has on people of color and to become aware of the obliviousness many white people have about their social privilege and unconscious participation in perpetuating racism. Although many students were shocked, our decision to begin in this way put in place a pedagogical framework that would shape the rest of the quarter. By beginning with what has separated us, we hoped to build upon this honesty and define the heart of our learning community as a place where all voices and stories would be respected. Here, from their final portfolios, are what some students said about this immediate plunge into understanding privilege and difference and its impact on them as co-learners in the class:

Learning about white privilege has been difficult, but enlightening and necessary. The first thing I noticed after reading Johnson's book was the many ways that I benefit from white privilege. For example, I started to notice that people of color get treated as if they are invisible, including by me. I was saddened and shocked by my own behavior, so I decided to make a conscious effort to change it. Instead of making judgments in my mind, I now try to recognize my thinking, and then alter it. When I am able to do this, the results are

wonderful. I feel connected to people in a way that I never have. (White student, female)

I must admit that when we first started reading the Johnson text, I was a little taken aback. The area of privilege that I most resisted was the idea that just being white allowed me a certain status and advantages that were not enjoyed by those who were not. At the time, I had very little insight into what was the motivating factor in my resistance to this idea. There were parts of my past that I had been unwilling to examine because they were too painful. As we progressed in the reading, it became clearer to me that I would need to examine my history to get to the root of my resistance. (White student, male)

Developing Personal Voice

Our second step in the development of a safe learning space was the encouragement of the development of personal voice. Our second book, David Mura's disturbingly honest portrayal, *Where Body Meets Memory*, chronicles a person of color's struggle through sexual addiction to white women as his path to discover and affirm his identity as a Japanese American male. Mura's willingness to tell his truth about personal voice, honesty, courage, and what it takes for many of us to come to terms with our cultural identity, set the bar high for us as a class. For some students, Mura gave them permission to test their voice and examine their lives in courageous ways:

I learned a lot about my voice as a writer, because I had the freedom to express my emotions and ideas without feeling judged. (Non-native speaker, student of color, male)

Exploring the use of one's personal voice through a personal narrative was the goal of the first essay assignment, given during the second week of the quarter. The following is an excerpt from that assignment:

Gathering: *Essentially we started the gathering process for this paper with our first class when we asked you to begin thinking about the topics in this class such as identity, culture, stories, and communication. Asking you to read Peggy McIntosh's article, "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," and write about it was another step in gathering your own responses and ideas about issues of identity as they relate to privilege, class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. Allan Johnson*

is very clear about his focus in Power, Privilege, and Difference when he says, “For myself, it means I have to take the initiative to find out how privilege operates in the world, how it affects people, and what all that has to do with me. It means I have to think the unthinkable, speak the unspeakable, break the silence, acknowledge the elephant, and then take my share of responsibility for what comes next” (10–11). In our next book, David Mura (Where Body Meets Memory) will add a focus on his journey as a Japanese American man struggling with his race, identity, and sexuality. Our main purpose in this class and for this piece of writing will be to encourage you to find your “voice” as you explore something about yourself and your experiences that you can add to the conversation and help break the silence. To begin your paper, use your in-class response to McIntosh, look at your notes from the film, The Color of Fear, and from the lecture on “The Politics of Location” given by the Women’s Studies professor, Karen Stuhldreher.

Assignment for this narrative/personal essay: *Write a personal narrative about an experience that has shaped your identity, values, and/or understanding, specifically around the issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and/or social class, AND reflect on how this experience has shaped your identity, values, and/or understanding. Some questions to consider might be: In this experience, were you in the position of having or not having privilege? What social institutions shaped your experience? What did you learn about your race, gender, sexual orientation, or social class identity? What changes, if any, did you make after this experience?*

Note: *The experience need not be a large life-defining moment; it can be something as simple as your first day at a new school. The important thing is that you reflect upon what you learned about your identity from the experience.*

Audience: *You should write thinking of our coordinated studies community as your audience. Don’t write about something that is too private to share with anyone in this class. The papers should be able to be read publicly.*

How did students do with this initial foray into the discovery of their own voice and their reflection of their identity formation? The following are responses from students writing more than six weeks later, as the course was ending:

Writing in the first person and including my own personal account has been a great but challenging process. I have found that in the past many of my instructors have deemed the word “I,” if used in an essay, as a swear word, and have forbade its use. I also had not been taught much about brainstorming. When writing a personal account and having so many options, an answer is not really pointed out in the book. I had to really dig deep to find the answer. (White student, female)

[I]t was hard for me to get started on an essay, but once I got started writing I could not stop. I never realized that I had so much to share about myself with other people. I learned that I don’t like to speak because my writing speaks for the words that cannot come out of my mouth. I feel my writing is my voice. (Non-native speaker, student of color, male)

Like everything in the course which built on the knowledge and skills learned in the previous weeks, students’ second paper (assigned in week seven) was an opportunity to practice an even more difficult writing challenge—a blending of creative storytelling with more structured analytical writing about the memoir or fiction we had read. Here is another excerpt from that assignment:

Focus on writing about and using literature: *As we finish reading Dreaming in Cuban and begin reading our last book, Love Medicine by Louise Erdrich, you should find common themes, interesting characters, and more fictional representations of how we search for our identity in culture and stories. We have seen how David Mura wrote about his own life and told us a non-linear story of his growth into adulthood as a Japanese American man. Even though the next three books are fiction, these writers each will admit that some of their own lives, families, and most certainly culture is represented in the stories they tell. They also include some of the myths that have become part of the culture and helped support an understanding of ourselves as members of a universal humanity who seeks to find meaning in our lives. Those of you who find these stories fascinating or difficult have the honor of entering another culture on the pages of these books. The authors are our teachers and we bring questions and desires of our own as we read these stories and connect them to our own lives.*

Paper topics: *For this second formal paper, we want you to combine using “writing about literature” with some story from your own life experience. The “personal” section of your essay could be the introduction or a paragraph or two in the middle or at the end after you have explored a theme or character from our books. You could use a short epigraph, a poem, or a story from your own family or an interview or conversation with someone in your family to bring the personal to your discussion of the literature. As we saw when Lee Mun Wah visited our class, the history of our name, our family, our dreams, all combine to make us who we are. Gloria Naylor did suffer emotionally, and she did move back and forth from the North to the South. Cristina Garcia could not have written Dreaming in Cuban without the historical reality of the Cuban revolution and the movement of her family between the United States and Cuba. Louise Erdrich writes Love Medicine and sets the story on and near the reservation that her family is from in North Dakota. She is Ojibwa-French and German-American like some of her characters.*

As we expected, many students found this second essay much more challenging than the first essay and struggled to find a way to weave personal experience with the themes from the books. But in the end, students found the experience worthwhile:

Writing these essays helped me think about and process information and ideas in the readings, videos, guest presentations, and class discussions because I was forced, and allowed, to analyze myself in relation to all that I was learning. From their examples, I was shown how to tell the story of my own identity . . . In the end, I found a way to tie it all together; my truth, my analysis of what we were learning in the classroom, and my interpretations of the literature.
(White student, female)

Sharing Cross-Cultural Stories

Our third step in intentionally creating a safe space was to deepen cross-cultural communication through the sharing of stories. Throughout the quarter, we heard many different kinds of cultural stories. Certainly the most obvious were the cultural stories of the authors we were reading. To encourage students to read these stories more thoughtfully and thoroughly we assigned weekly seminar papers.

The writing of these papers helped students practice and improve their critical reading, thinking, and writing skills:

Writing the individual seminar papers allowed me to prepare well for the in-class seminar discussions. The papers helped me to truly process my thoughts about the various books, and to go deeper within myself to analyze the response to the things that I was reading. (White student, male)

A corollary practice we used to push students into more thoughtful reading was to ask them to examine the stories within their historical context. We did this by assigning weekly research assignments. For example, when we were reading David Mura's book, we asked students to spend one week researching and reporting on the Japanese American internment camp. When we were reading Christina Garcia's novel about the culture of Cuba, students researched different elements about the Cuban culture and about the history of the United States and Cuba since the Bay of Pigs. These mini-research assignments deepened students' understanding of the cultural complexity of these stories.

A second "chapter" of stories we encouraged were from the students themselves. Because the class was richly culturally diverse, we provided time each week for students to practice their listening skills while they heard each other's stories. We called this time "cultural conversations" and as one student writes:

I have learned volumes from the stories we studied and just as much from the people in this class. For example, Rex (not his real name), who is in my seminar group, helped me understand more about his culture. He has given me an understanding about what it is like to be an immigrant from an African country and how the racism in this country has affected him. This is a perspective I could not have gotten anywhere else. I learned from Yin (not his real name) what it is like to be pulled over by a police officer for "driving while Asian," and yet he has a deep appreciation of the opportunity to be in this country and could be described by some as a patriot. Sue (not her real name) told me what it felt like to be the outsider and different when she traveled to Colombia to meet her husband's parents. (White student, female)

Our last "chapter" of cultural stories came from guest speakers. Mark Mitsui, NSCC's Director of Student Success and Retention, came twice

to our class to share his knowledge about and his personal experience with the Japanese American internment camps. Mark has spent much of his life studying the impact of the camp experience on the Japanese American community. Because his father was interned, Mark’s interest is both personal *and* scholarly. After describing the historical and (il)legal circumstances which resulted in the internment camps, Mark led students in an experiential exercise to foster deeper understanding of what it feels like to be treated as the “other.” Students were given a few minutes to decide which of their possessions they would take, leave behind, and/or sell. Students were also asked, at the end of the exercise, to mark mock ballots in response to the two questions Japanese Americans were asked: “Do you swear allegiance to the United States?” and “Do you abdicate any loyalty to the Japanese Emperor?” This vote was in order to better understand the “No-No” Boy and “Yes-Yes” Boy division within the Japanese American community. As is traditionally the case in our classroom when the Japanese American internment camp experience is discussed, the majority of students were shocked to learn about this tragedy and then angry that they were never exposed to this historic truth in their high school history lessons.

We were equally fortunate to have Lee Mun Wah, producer of nationally known videos *The Color of Fear* and *Last Chance for Eden*, visit our class and share how racism ended his career as a teacher after his mother was murdered and forced him to feel the pain of that experience and search to find purpose from that tragedy. Both of these cultural storytellers created profound moments for us in the classroom to practice ways of listening and communicating more honestly and empathetically with each other. As one student wrote:

Mun Wah was definitely one of the most influential figures for me in this class. It was through watching his films that I started to actually feel the affects of white racism on people of color. When he came to our class, I was overwhelmed by his presence, but more than that, I was overwhelmed by the way he was able to make me see what I was a part of. He made me see everyone in the class and become curious in a way that I hadn’t been before. I felt like I would be losing the opportunity of a lifetime if I didn’t take the time to learn more about the people I was sharing this experience with. I feel so blessed to have been able to meet so many different people in this class, to hear their perspectives, and to be able to talk so candidly about such sensitive topics. I feel so lucky that others have

shared such personal parts of their life with me and I will never forget this class as long as I live. (Student of color, female)

In reflecting on the impact of this coordinated studies course on the lives of our students, we asked ourselves this question: Is the creation of a balanced learning environment, one that carefully and thoughtfully blends the “softer” human elements of nurture, personal voice, listening, and emotional honesty with the “harder” academic elements of critical thinking and writing, and a growing appreciation of a diverse world, a more effective long-range way of educating students to ultimately be “intensely interested in the development of each individual, of the group as a whole, and of a more democratic society” (Belenky, et al. 1999, 14)? Our students answer this question in these ways:

It has been a long time since I was excited about school, but this class took my school interest to whole other level. I looked forward to coming; listening to people’s stories and learning things about myself I never knew. I think about things differently. I hear a little better and sometimes the sounds scare and surprise me. It isn’t all the time, but I feel like I sometimes see the world around me in a different light. I am more aware of the things usually left unsaid. There is so much left to be learned, and I hope this is only the beginning of my journey. (White student, female)

This class has changed the way I look at life and the people in it. I want to meet new people and experience their cultures. If I had not taken this class I would just be one of those people who go on with their lives without knowing the richness that lies within each human being. (White student, male)

It seems to us that the intentional blending of the “soft” and “hard” elements of a learning community, coupled with a commitment to honesty, developing personal voice, and sharing stories across cultures, helps to develop a new way of being together—or as one student said so simply, “we have learned to speak in a language that human hearts, and not just minds, can understand.”

Endnotes

1. The class consisted of 23 females, 18 males, 19 students of color, 22 white students, 13 non-native English speakers, with an average age of 30 years old.

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