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RADICAL EMPOWERMENT: PRACTICING THE PRINCIPLES IN A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY COURSE

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Abstract

This action research case study explores the implementation of a radical empowerment structure in an undergraduate Community Psychology (CP) course at a rural university in the United States. CP as a field is focused on values such as collective wellbeing, empowerment and citizen participation, collaboration, respect for diversity, and sense of community. The university serves low income, first generation, and other non-traditional students – the focal constituents of much CP research and action. In Spring 2024, the author experimented with radical empowerment in which students designed the syllabus, assignments, weekly agendas, and grading schemes. Students reported working harder in this class than in any other, and the quality of self-assigned weekly homework, reflections, term projects, and presentations was exceptionally high. Students implemented a high level of peer-support, peer-revision, and accountability to each other. The experiment challenged the professor's understanding of power and trust in education, as well as her role as an educator. Adjustments were made for the second iterations, while maintaining the central tenet of radical empowerment. This design is not appropriate for all subjects, but may be

adapted to many full courses or course projects to empower students and cultivate ownership of their education.

Keywords: Community Psychology, Student Empowerment, Power Sharing, Pedagogy, Undergraduate

Introduction

The University of Maine at Augusta (UMA) is a state university with an access mission to education. Among the seven "sister schools" that make up the University of Maine System of state universities, UMA's mission is to provide high quality, affordable education to students where they are at. UMA is one of the first schools in the United States to provide online education, following its early adoption of offering courses over television and by mail in the 1980s (uma.edu). UMA has two campuses in central Maine, one in Augusta and one in Bangor, and 8 college centers across the state, which support live and broadcast classes for students in remote locations. Additionally, UMA has a large selection of programs and courses offered via videoconference and/or entirely asynchronous online to serve place-committed and working adults who cannot attend live classes. As an access university, UMA has low barrier admissions. Adult students who have been away from education will be accepted to the university, and can use remedial courses as elective credits toward their ultimate degrees. A university administrator once told the author, "Our students may come in with a poorer educational background than students at our sister schools, but I would put any of our graduates against graduates from any other institution" (B. McAleer, personal communication, 2016).

As of this writing, the average UMA student is a 28-year-old working female with children. 90% are Pell Grant eligible, signifying a high number of low-income students (uma.edu). Many of our students live in rural communities that become isolated with winter weather, often losing power or internet access. Many students experience financial precarity in their lives, such that one unexpected bill can cause a cascade of repercussions lasting weeks or months or years (Wolfgram & Kendall, 2023). Similarly, with many family and community responsibilities, it is not uncommon for a sudden change in life circumstances to overwhelm the student's time commitments and pull them away from their education, sometimes without the ability to update their professors. The students at UMA are often deeply invested in their communities. It is the author's experience that most UMA students enroll with specific goals to improve their lives, their children's lives, and/or their community.

Community Psychology (CP) is a field that is grounded in core values such as collective wellbeing, empowerment and citizen participation, collaboration, respect for diversity, and sense of community (Kloos et al., 2021; Townley, et al., 2011). Sense of community (SOC) is comprised of four major factors: a feeling of belonging, a sense of mutual impact between the individual and

the community, a sense of needs fulfillment, and an emotional connection between the individual and community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Brodsky (2009) noted that SOC can exist along axes from weak to strong and from negative to positive. A stronger positive sense of community is generally aligned with increased wellbeing of individuals as well as strength and cohesion of the community. Boyd and Nowell (2020) added that sense of community responsibility (SOCR), including motivation and commitment to service for that community, also increases positive outcomes for the individual and the community.

CP research, interventions, and actions tend to focus on under-resourced and marginalized communities that may experience discrimination or barriers to achieving stability and wellbeing (Collins, et al., 2018). This describes the vast majority of UMA students. Empowerment, collaboration, and citizen participation are of vital importance to the wellbeing of people who are often excluded from decision-making processes (see, e.g., Peterson & Reid, 2003). Each time the author taught her undergraduate class in CP, she would experience cognitive dissonance while implementing the traditional course structure of academia – that in which the instructor decides for the class how they will learn prior to even meeting the members of the class. While preparing for the Spring 2024 semester, the instructor decided to use the values of CP to teach CP. Specifically, the instructor would rely on radical empowerment, sharing her power as instructor with students so that they could participate in decision making about the class (Weisi & Ahmadi, 2024). This would ideally respect students' learning diversity, and increase students' citizen participation and collaboration in their own learning.

Methods

In the Spring 2024 academic semester, the author conducted an action research experiment with her undergraduate Community Psychology course. Action research is a practicable research strategy to systematically apply interventions or changes to ongoing activities, followed by careful evaluation of outcomes and iterative adjustments to the interventions (McNiff, 2017). The goal of this project was to implement the values and methods of CP into the teaching of CP. Specifically, the author sought to implement 1) radical empowerment, 2) community collaboration, and 3) serving as an expert advisor/collaborator rather than an expert overseer. A commonly invoked phrase in CP is that "the community is the expert of the community," meaning that despite the expertise professionals bring to a project, the community will always best know

their needs, priorities, and processes. The professor trusted that students know their learning styles, needs, and capacities for learning. Therefore, the professor would provide resources, facilitate a consensus model decision-making process, and act in whatever capacity the class preferred.

The professor considered her expertise for this collaboration, and identified two major areas: 1) expert in the field of CP, and 2) expert in pedagogy. Wary of requiring the purchase of a textbook outside of group consensus (institutionally, the book requirement would need to be implemented before students enrolled in the class and were therefore unable to consent to its purchase), the professor identified a free online textbook and multiple CP-related websites for learning materials that could be utilized. Since the students had never constructed a syllabus, the professor created a "shell" syllabus including an array of options used in previous classes, such as homework, reflections, class activities, term projects, and community applications to support the students in idea-generation for their own learning (or they could select from these previously-designed options at their discretion). Grading, weekly assignments, class policies, etc. were left open. University policies such as compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) were included and non-negotiable.

In the week prior to the start of the first semester of the intervention, the professor sent announcements explaining the experimental class structure, along with the shell syllabus (a shared google document) and a note that class decisions would be made on the first day of class. From there, the professor had to wait and see if her trust in her students was founded and they collaboratively created a complete course, or if they would, for example, decide they could all go home and do nothing for the semester and get passing grades anyway.

Throughout the first semester, extensive notes were kept by the professor, and email messages and course evaluation statistics and comments were saved to provide student perspectives on the outcome of the course. This data was analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis (McNiff, 2017). Specifically, the instructor was looking for evidence that 1) students learned the course content in a comparable or increased fashion to traditional course design; and 2) students personally, academically, and/or professionally experienced and benefited from the CP values of empowerment, SOC, SOCR, and holistic wellbeing. Additionally, the instructor sought evidence to recommend improvements in the intervention design for the next iteration of the class. During the second iteration, the instructor made appropriate adjustments to the intervention plan according to the first semester's findings.

Results

Semester One

First Class Session

The first class session had near-perfect attendance. It is not uncommon for students to miss the first week as they return from their travels or finish seasonal employment. Every student save one attended. The professor began the class by introducing herself and the field of Community Psychology. Next was an explanation of the difficulty of teaching this course in a top-down model, and an outline of course goals – use a consensus model to co-create the syllabus, assignments, and grading criteria, and abide by the decisions of the class. The instructor promised to be a failsafe; student grades would come to no harm due to unfair decisions by the class. Beyond that, it was up to the students to decide how to proceed.

The students took the challenge seriously. They perused the syllabus shell (which included sample weekly activities, term projects, grading rubrics, etc. from previous classes), and discussed the educational value and accessibility of each. They were well aware of UMA's student demographics, and so they did not want to come to decisions that would be burdensome for students with children, or jobs, or who could not travel, or had health problems. Several students adamantly declared that they "came here to learn" and they had "paid for this class to learn." By the end of the first class, students had decided to have weekly chapter readings and homework (answering chapter discussion questions on the online discussion board), online journals on educational applications and personal growth, weekly in-class discussion of class topics, and a term project of their own choosing. The book had more chapters than there were weeks in the semester, so students decided to begin the semester reading 2 chapters each week, and ease back to 1 after the work in their other classes started to pick up.

Second Class Session

The second class was dedicated to grading structures, and again the students took the discussion very seriously. Early in the conversation, one student expressed that their term project would be focused on universal basic income in which all citizens receive a baseline income ensuring their basic human needs are met so they can focus on being productive citizens rather than spending their energy focused solely on survival. Later, this student proposed a "universal basic A." Similar in philosophy, the universal basic A would allow students to focus on their learning rather than worrying about how other students might assess them or whether their grade

would be hurt by the experimental nature of the class. The professor again assured everyone she would act as a fail-safe and protect students' grades, but she did not argue for or against the universal basic A. Other students did.

Several students argued quite passionately that while they wanted an A in the class, they also wanted the A "to mean something." They were worried that the universal basic A would result in some students working very hard and other students doing nothing, and they did not believe it was fair that both of those groups would earn the same A. Other students referred to the precarious nature of the lives of many students at UMA – students with kids or jobs or emergencies may be pulled away from class, but that did not mean they weren't making up the work or their learning during stable times. They argued that it was not always possible to tell the extent of others' educational growth. Some students noted they were all starting from a different place than each other, such that one student may end in a place of understanding that another started at. Wasn't their learning still equivalent?

Ultimately, the universal basic A was adopted by the class. Far from being seen as an excuse to slack on their work, the primary opinion expressed by students was a sense of responsibility to earn the A they had already been granted, and to support each other's learning and progress. This sense of responsibility to the class will be revisited shortly.

Quality of Work

Multiple students reported that they worked harder in this class than they had in any other. One student said even her family members were commenting on how much work she was putting into the class. Indeed, the professor has generally high expectations for her students' quality of work, and was gratified to note that students' self-assigned weekly homework, reflections, term projects, and presentations were all at least on par with student work from other undergraduate classes, and in many cases with her graduate classes. The students had indeed embraced the freedom of the universal basic A to create work *they* valued rather than working to the assignment requirements and teacher's expectations. This enabled them to focus on their own excellence as opposed to others' judgments.

Peer Support

In addition to assignments, the students implemented class processes of peer support. This was a surprise result, as the professor had not suggested or expected these structures, though they did indicate the cultivation of a sense of community and sense of community responsibility. After the first week of homework, some students requested the online discussion boards be set up

so they could not see others' entries before they input their own. While they found it very helpful to refine their own understanding by reading others' posts, they wanted their original work to reflect their own thoughts first, uninfluenced by what they might see others posting. They agreed students could always post "I don't understand this; I want to read other posts before I answer" if they were struggling, but no one ever did that. They did, however, have lively conversations online about difficult concepts, questioning and correcting each other's work. Content discussions in class showed a similar level of academic support. Students also provided feedback on each other's term projects throughout the development and implementation process, and offered constructive critiques for their final presentations.

Each week, students would check in with each other personally, and offer messages of support as appropriate. As the semester progressed students would ask after students who were missing, send texts to check on them, and create space during class discussion to process major events in each other's lives. Relating their experiences back to academics, students who began to worry that they did not deserve their A were reassured by peers that the point of the universal basic A was to offer cushion when outside forces made traditional learning impossible, and to focus on their educational journey while also taking care of themselves.

Precarious Students

As previously discussed, it is not uncommon for members of our student population to disappear mid-semester when an unexpected event causes cascading troubles in their lives. This first semester of implementation, five students disappeared from the class. All but one returned before the end of the semester. The crises that took them from the class included a major medical event, a family crisis, an unavoidable workload change at their job, an addiction relapse, and one unknown cause. The reason there weren't five unknown causes is because they were able to return. One student explicitly noted that after missing several classes in a row, they normally would not have come back to class at all, but they "felt responsible to the class and to this experiment" so they returned even though they felt embarrassed and behind on their learning. The others agreed that if they had not known they could rely on the universal basic A and the high level of peer support that had become the class norm, they would have written the course off as a failure after missing a couple of sessions. Instead, they were able to return in the secure knowledge that they could keep learning without the added stress of missed time.

Semester Two

One year later, the course was run for the second time. The instructor reviewed outcomes of the course and brainstormed where improvements could be made. One weakness of the first iteration was the textbook, which was not as high quality as other texts the instructor had used for the course. The students reported that the textbook was fine and they appreciated not having to purchase anything for the class. However, the instructor was keenly aware throughout the semester of everything the free textbook had failed to cover or covered in insufficient depth. While wanting to maintain the integrity of student agency and choice, the instructor ultimately decided that part of the role of "facilitating expert" was to make expert decisions that would ensure students had the best learning outcomes possible with high quality resources at their disposal. So, while the overall structure of the course, including the collaborative efforts of the first and second class to co-design the syllabus, remained the same, the instructor assigned a textbook for purchase prior to the class starting. When introducing the course, she made this decision explicit to the class and opened the floor for discussion on that decision. Students reported that they trusted her expert opinion on the topic, and between purchasing used copies or previous editions, or in one case, illegally downloading the text, no students reported financial hardship from this decision.

First and Second Class Sessions

The students in the second iteration of this experiment approached the shared decision-making process with the same seriousness shown by the previous students. They made different decisions, though the discussions preceding those decisions were very similar. The students wanted to learn. They wanted to have consistent engagement from all students, though they recognized that students had different learning styles, levels of introversion, and lived experiences which may take them away from the class for a period of time. They wanted all students to have the same capacity to succeed even if they had an emergency and missed a few weeks. They again noted that it is not always apparent how much another student learned. The class was adamant that there should be accountability among the students, but the course structures should not be so limiting as to become inequitable.

The students decided that there should be homework that is due every week, again beginning the first week of class. The students would take notes and/or answer the critical thinking questions at the end of each chapter (according to what worked best for their own learning).

Additionally, all students would prepare "2 Minutes" of original discussion contributions to bring to class each week. These two minutes served as accountability to each other since they would be discussing the week's readings and applications. The length of the discussion contribution was critical because it would a) keep talkative or extroverted students from taking over the class discussion, and b) not be too burdensome on students who were introverted or who had longer cognitive processing times that made it difficult to raise their hand and contribute without prior preparation.

The students also decided that they would each complete a "Big Thing" which included term projects with various applications of the principles of CP, or a final exam. Some students opted to do a project and a final exam if they felt like their project did not sufficiently engage with the content or showcase their learning. Finally, the students decided they wanted to lean into the instructor's role as expert facilitator. They requested to have lectures, activities, and/or supplemental materials every week to help students better understand CP.

The students did not finalize their grading decisions until the third week, as a courtesy to one student who expressed having a lot of interest and anxiety over the grading process. This student missed the second week of class due to a family medical issue. During the second class, students developed a tentative grading plan that they then held for final agreement until this student could offer live input. The grading plan was that everyone would start with an A, but they had to engage deeply and consistently with their weekly homework and class discussions as well as their Big Thing in order to keep it. The students decided the ultimate grading decisions be made by the instructor.

Collaborative Evaluation

The textbook used during this second iteration includes an in-depth section on program development, implementation, and evaluation (Kloos, et al., 2021). Toward the end of the semester, one in-class activity was to evaluate the logic, structure, and implementation of the course. The students conducted an ad hoc formative evaluation of the class they were in, critiquing weaknesses and offering recommendations for future iterations. The students reflected on their experiences and the instructor's reasoning for using radical empowerment to teach CP. One student said, "The logic makes sense. The format of this class fits the content." Another student agreed that it would have been hypocritical to teach CP as a top-down class when the field valued the exact opposite for community engagement. A student noted that the structure of the class gave

students a participatory learning experience of applied adaptability and shared decision-making. They also noted that they really liked the textbook chosen for this class. Indeed, every single week during their 2 Minutes, at least one student would express how very much they liked that chapter. This had not happened in the first semester.

The students also reflected on the decisions they made for this specific iteration of the class. They liked that their decisions led to open communication, open listening, and empowered students to express their needs. One student said, "The flexibility of this class allows us to use our own resources. We went after projects that tapped into our own strengths and knowledge. One student noted she had never spoken up in classes before. She said, "I would never have raised my hand before this class. I had only spoken if I was called on." At the end of the semester, she was very comfortable speaking up. This particular experience was an unexpected but welcome example of student empowerment.

Not all feedback was fully positive, and the students had recommendations for how to improve future iterations of the class. For example, one student said, "The first few weeks weirded me out. I'd never been in a class with so much autonomy and agency. I grew to like it, but at first I was thinking, 'Wait, isn't that *your* job?'" Other students agreed that they had felt stress at the beginning of the semester due to the uncertainty of what to expect. They recommended creating more security at the beginning of the semester by telling the students "We're going to make these decisions by the end of the second class," or maybe even having an open discussion about the uncertainty. A student suggested the instructor explicitly say, "We will embrace the uncertainty. It's going to happen because [collaboratively creating the syllabus is] weird. You will feel out of your element. You'll need to be decisive and take initiative." But, she noted, these are all valuable skills to learn from CP.

Discussion

This project implemented a radical empowerment course design in which the instructor shared decision-making responsibilities regarding the structures, activities, and grading with the students. As of this writing, two iterations of this class have been implemented. Feedback was solicited from students in both classes, and in the second class, students conducted an informal evaluation of the course and provided recommendations for the next iteration. Students reported feeling empowered by this collaboration, and took ownership of the course with a responsibility

to their own and their classmates' educational experience. Students exhibited a respect for diversity during the decision-making process, e.g., building flexibility into the course requirements to align with each student's strengths and interests. And students in both classes reported experiencing a strong positive sense of community with their classmates as they navigated this class together.

The radical empowerment design of the course challenged the students and the instructor in multiple ways. Students felt challenged to work together to cultivate the best possible learning outcomes for everyone in the class, taking on responsibilities they did not have in other undergraduate classes. The instructor felt challenged in her understanding of power hierarchies in education, as well as her role as an educator in academia. Taking on the collaborative role as expert facilitator, as opposed to top-down decision-maker, meant that the instructor was continuously grappling with her level of power. Making recommendations is not the same as telling students which decisions to make, but, since the common practice is for the instructor to make all decisions, there was always the possibility that students would defer to the instructor out of habit even if they disagreed. She continuously reminded students that the final decision was theirs and she would abide by the will of the class.

This project also required a lot of trust between the students and the instructor. The students could have always made decisions seeking an easy A without actually learning any of the course content. The instructor could have always changed her mind and issued requirements for students that they did not want. Ultimately, though, students and instructor all committed themselves to the process of shared ownership and responsibility for learning.

This design is not appropriate for all subjects. Instructors in other disciplines, or even in other subfields of psychology, may not be able to adapt this process to their courses when content or standards in the field require otherwise. However, partial adaptation may be possible. For example, instructors may empower students to choose among several options for their weekly homework, class discussions, group projects, or term projects. Partial or full adaptation of shared instructional decision-making can empower students to cultivate a sense of ownership for their own and their peer's education.

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