

(Re)membering Together: The Possibilities of a Liberatory Culturally Relevant Education

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The truth of the matter is that no institution anywhere is exempt from the terror of white supremacy and its harmful ideological values, traditions, and practices. This includes K-12 and higher educational settings, the curriculum used to teach, and the pedagogical practices employed in such learning spaces. While unsettling, centering that truth allows us to think critically and decide what it means for our respective communities. This paper will describe a two-year project funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation to decolonize the curriculum and teaching practices at campuses across the City University of New York. Authors will highlight how mentoring experiences have informed the professional identities of social justice educators and their implementation of anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and culturally affirming educational practices that promote healing and wellness for faculty and students alike. Using the practices of (Re)membering as proposed by Cynthia B. Dillard and Currere as conceptualized by Taliaferro Baszile in a community of practice, social justice educators engaged in deep reflection about their past educational experiences, educational philosophies, curriculum, and pedagogy. Educators had an opportunity to imagine what an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and culturally affirming education can be like at the Hispanic Serving Institution where we teach.

Keywords: Mentoring, coaching, culturally relevant education, higher education

Introduction

It is often said that we are living in unprecedented times, however this may be an exaggeration given that this is just a reiteration of the insidious violence, silencing, and attempted erasure people of color all over the world have experienced throughout history. As a point of entry into the conversation about remembering, we make a disclaimer that interrogating truth is an uncomfortable endeavor that unsettles but it is an inevitable part of honestly engaging with harmful historical facts and current turbulent realities. The truth of the matter is that no institution anywhere is exempt from the terror of white supremacy and its harmful ideological values, traditions, and practices. This includes K-12 and higher educational settings, the curriculum used, and the pedagogical practices employed in such learning spaces. While unsettling, centering that truth allows us to think critically and decide what it means for our respective communities. The attempt to silence this line of inquiry is a disservice because it represents a missed opportunity to take corrective action and make amends. This paper will describe a two-year project designed to decolonize the curriculum and teaching practices at one of the campuses at the City University of New York as part of a larger initiative funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation focused on Black, Race, and Ethnic Studies. For the sake of clarity, we share the call for proposals which specifically

asked for projects focused on decolonizing the curriculum:

Despite the breadth of knowledge produced by indigenous, postcolonial, antiracist, and feminist scholars, significant barriers to acceptance remain embedded in academic disciplines. Funding through this RFP will be provided for the design of courses or curricula to decolonize pedagogy and instructional practices across disciplines. Strong proposals will demonstrate how settler colonialism and systemic racism are embedded within institutional practices, policies, and culture, including interpersonal relations. Proposals should emphasize efforts and strategies to address structural problems and cultural understandings that extend beyond the classroom. Proposals that center the experiences, needs, and contributions of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and other historically marginalized racial groups will be prioritized. (CUNY, 2022).

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how the authors created a community of practice to inform the professional identities of social justice educators and their implementation of anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and culturally affirming educational practices that promote healing and wellness for faculty, staff, and students alike.

Theoretical Framework and Intended Goals for the Project

We arrive in educational spaces with a lived experience informed by our families, our cultural backgrounds, and our upbringing. However, educational systems in the U.S. are designed to prepare individuals to gain viable skills which include compliance, appeasement, and a toning down of anything that will unsettle dominant culture (Kozol, 2005). In these educational spaces, we learn what we need to do to gain the approval of our teachers and how to survive in a system that is trying to change who we are from the minute we walk in the door (Love, 2019). We learn individualism and competitiveness which informs our way of thinking and being. Within Eurocentric educational spaces that promote “survival of the fittest” mentality, only those who read, write, and speak the language of “whiteness” fluently are deemed the fittest. However, no matter how hard people of color work and how much of our race and ethnicity is muted, we are operating within institutions built by systemic racism and settler colonial ideals (Garcia-Peña, 2022). As project facilitators, we were inviting other educators into a conversation about humanizing education, a way of teaching and learning that is not focused on killing the spirit of our students by erasing who they are but rather is curious about who they are and what they bring to the learning space.

We wanted to engage with diverse educators with varying levels of expertise and years of experience and so created a welcoming space characterized by a sense of curiosity which allowed participating educators to show up as the most authentic version of themselves and to critically reflect on who they are, where they come from, and what they bring to the table. Together, we spent two years reflecting on our formative educational experiences, our current work as educators, and our commitment to implementing emancipatory education and liberatory pedagogical practices. Given our deep desire to change teaching, learning, and institutional practices informed by settler colonialism and systemic racism, we share the perspective posited by educational researcher Leigh Patel who suggests, “Decolonization requires radical dismantling and disruption” (p.93). With that in mind, the ultimate goal of the project was to invite educators to remember their own educational experiences steeped in dominant cultural values, interrogate current curriculum and pedagogical practices at the City University of New York, and imagine how we can provide something different for students who share similar racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds as ours.

Reflections on Decolonized Research Methods

Formal research begins with making observations of the phenomena of interest, developing research questions, coming up with a

hypothesis, conducting an experiment, testing the hypothesis, drawing conclusions, and reporting findings. This project is no different in that the participants have all observed instances of harmful practices within educational settings. While the incidents varied in severity, the impact was still damaging. Settler colonialism and institutional racism have informed educational practices which have historically harmed people of color. Starting with the original inhabitants of U.S. territories, African Americans, Latinos as well as those who are different including individuals that are non-English speakers, disabled, neurodivergent, and/or identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

What made this exploration different was our commitment to decolonized approaches to research inquiry. Using the practices of (Re)membering proposed by Cynthia B. Dillard and Currere as conceptualized by Taliaferro Baszile, fourteen social justice educators met monthly in a community of practice over a span of two years to explore the past, present, and future of education with the intention of creating more liberatory, emancipatory educational experiences with students at the City University of New York. Dillard and Neal (2021) suggest that “When we (re)member as part of the process of inquiry, we will have experiences with time, space, and spirit that are different from anything else we may have previously experienced, a new way of imagining and seeing life that does not move us farther from these experiences but instead moves us more deeply into their possibilities.” (p. 1187). Furthermore, Taliaferro Baszile (2015) states that “currere asks that one (1) remember and reflect on past educational experiences, (2) contemplate desires and fantasies of the future, (3) consider the impact of both the past and future on the shape of the present, and (4) synthesize thinking across these moments as a way to purposefully engage one’s learning in the present” (p. 119). The project was an opportunity to be part of a community of practice where authentic relating through storytelling was possible and caring reciprocal mentoring relationships could form. Moreover, participants could gain skills to help them to navigate uncaring educational spaces that do not accept the fullness of who we are. We began with an invitation sent via email to social justice educators teaching in a small department at one of the senior campuses at the City University of New York which read as follows,

We invite you to join us in a project sponsored by the Black, Race, and Ethnic Studies Initiative at the City University of New York where we will examine our curriculum and teaching practices. Together we will spend time thinking about our own educational experiences, our experiences as educators, and our commitment to emancipatory education and liberatory pedagogical practices.

Fourteen social justice educators agreed to join us on this transformative journey. A project

such as this requires an enormous amount of flexibility and courage because we were interested in creating a research experience where participants could share their lived experiences through reflection and storytelling in a relatively safe environment. Oftentimes, researchers will promise safety to participants, however, given the potentially triggering conversations we were going to have, it would have been dishonest to promise safety. Noting the literature about brave spaces, Nelson (2024) states they will vary with some “being loosely defined and facilitated to strictly defined and highly facilitated” (p.9). The authors add “Brave spaces can allow for challenging conversations that are not possible in safe spaces where participants may expect to remain comfortable” (p.11). We opted for a carefully curated space with strict facilitation protocols. Offering a brave space encouraged participants to share intimate details of their lived experiences in a highly organized manner while recognizing the discomfort this could potentially cause. Unlike the more commonly asked questions about those who made a positive difference in our lives, we asked participants to think of the least positive, least helpful educational experiences they had in elementary school, high school, or college. Why would we ask such an unsettling question? Formative educational experiences impact how we view ourselves but more importantly, they can also shape how we view education. This intimate sharing of life experiences could only happen in a brave space that centered mutual respect and psychological safety.

Invitation to (Re)member, (Re)evaluate, and (Re)imagine

There were three principal investigators working on the project who met bi-weekly over the two-year period to plan research activities including the content we would share with participants prior to meeting which included short readings, multimedia resources, and reflection questions used to prepare for upcoming sessions. Learning modules were created on the university learning management system that participants could access at their convenience. We shared literature about (re)membering and current and modeled the practices by sharing our own stories of harm before asking participants to share theirs.

The practice of educational autoethnography was employed to help participants reflect in advance and come prepared to share a small part of their story of harm experienced in educational spaces. Autoethnography is a useful qualitative research approach which helped participants situate themselves both in their own educational experience as well as the larger educational context. By exploring their own positionality, participants could reflect deeply on who they are, where they come from, and where they want to go as educators. The Zoom platform was used to host monthly meetings. Restorative practices were implemented to organize our synchronous virtual

meetings. These included welcoming rituals, grounding exercises, value setting activities, creating community agreements, storytelling rounds, and closing practices. During each session, we reviewed the project learning objectives which included the following:

- Educators will be able to discuss the impact their personal, educational, and professional experiences have had on the development of their teaching philosophy
- Educators will be able to identify Eurocentric, settler-colonial traditions in their own personal, educational, and professional experiences
- Educators will be able to identify the ways in which their practice is or can be anti-oppressive, inclusive, culturally responsive, and emancipatory
- This was often followed by a discussion of readings, reflections questions, and sharing next steps on our journey toward creating a more humanizing teaching and learning experience.

Concluding Thoughts

Over time, what we found was a sense of mental exhaustion resulting from an accelerated work pace, pressure to over perform, and constant preoccupation with work which is prevalent in academia. Mindful of this, we decided to employ the practice of slow work during our monthly sessions to alleviate some of that tension. Scholars engaged in the empirical study and practical applications of slow work find that this way of working centers our shared humanity, respects different work rhythms, promotes self-awareness, and includes time for reflection and rest. This research suggests that implementation of slow work can result in more purposeful, productive, and sustainable work outcomes. Furthermore, organizations that embrace slow work value improved quality of life and the overall wellbeing of their employees (Silvestre, Gonçalves, & Velez, 2024). Participating in this project gave us all time to slow down, breathe deeply, and reflect on the work we were doing.

In his book, *Hope and Healing in Education: How Urban Activist and Teachers are Reclaiming Matters of the Heart*, Shawn Ginwright (2015) states:

Acknowledging harm and developing a vision for wellbeing are necessary, but without implementation, no healing will occur. Implementing practices that facilitate healing begins with healing yourself. It is not possible to create vibrant, thriving classrooms, schools, and community programs for young people with adults who are toxic! Implementing these practices requires that we integrate a philosophy and worldview of wellbeing, healing, and joy into our daily practices, and only then will we experience “successful” implementation. (p.150)

Participating social justice educators engaged

in deep reflection about their educational experiences, explored how past educational experiences have informed our professional identities and educational philosophies, and imagined the liberatory pedagogical practices we could employ at the Hispanic Serving Institution where we teach. While this work caused a great deal of discomfort, it was important to move beyond the discomfort toward an increased critical consciousness about the insidiousness of white supremacy and motivation to engage in change.

By interrogating existing curriculum and pedagogical practices, to identify content and practices we considered problematic, we began to imagine what an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and culturally affirming education could be like at the Hispanic Serving Institution where we teach. This project has resulted in an ongoing commitment to decolonizing our curriculum and pedagogical practices, to ensure a more inclusive and culturally relevant learning experience for our diverse student body. The social justice educators involved have planned a retreat to interrogate how this project has influenced their work and how we can continue learning and unlearning in community. In closing, we offer the following recommendations:

- Educators and educational researchers must consider the lasting impact of colonization as they engage in curriculum development, pedagogical practices, and research endeavors. Increased awareness is the first step toward transformative teaching and learning. To that end, we call for more decolonized approaches to all these practices.
- Slow work is a fairly new concept that needs to be explored further. It merits more attention which can contribute to the limited body of scholarship currently available. Our experience indicates that slow work can result in healthier and more satisfying experiences for those working in academia. However, more research is needed to understand its full potential.

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