

Exploring Collective Learning Conversations in Economics Education: A Social Change Narrative Inquiry Approach

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ABSTRACT Scholars of critical learning theory believe that, central to critical pedagogy, schools and lecture rooms can be places where critical communities can be started. These scholars argue that for critical pedagogy to have an impact, transformative learning is an important space in which discourse can change the way an individual reaches a new understanding of something that causes a fundamental paradigm shift. This paper explores the collective learning conversations of student teachers by drawing on their experiences and challenges while teaching Economics in a culturally diverse setting. The researcher follows an ethnographical approach, rethinking experiences and drawing from diverse Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) student voices (n=349) through a reflective assignment. In summation, practical strategies are provided for building collective community learning spaces within and beyond the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, researchers in the educational sciences have shown a growing interest in using narrative enquiry-based research methods in teacher education settings. Scholars employed more of these research methods and believed that schools and lecture rooms could be places where critical communities could be started. The researcher concurs with Hooks (2003) and Boler (2003) that teacher education for change, especially in the field of Economics education, can be extremely rewarding, but also incredibly emotionally challenging for teachers. Students require not only effective communication skills and knowledge to reflect on and react to the world in order to transform it (Freire 2003; Wink 2007); they also need support networks to sustain them in their practices and in the inevitable struggles that result.

Although critically thoughtful writings are needed on how teachers and students work together, the researcher argues that, as teachers, we should also be promoting community building among our students. Doing so will not only strengthen the much needed support networks, but will also encourage students to practise positive interdependence and social accountability in the classroom. This paper explores the collective learning conversations of student teachers by drawing from the challenges and experiences

they encountered while teaching Economics in a culturally diverse setting.

The following research questions were formulated to achieve the objective of this paper: What are the challenges facing the researcher in creating collective learning conversations in the Economics education classroom? What were the students' views regarding collective learning as a dialogical tool and how did this empower them to enhance critical communities in Economics education? What possible practical strategies could be formulated to empower students through collective learning conversations?

Literature Review

Central to critical pedagogy is the idea that schools and lecture rooms can be places where critical communities of practice can be started through dialogue. Several scholars posit that some members of society (those who can be regarded as disadvantaged) are robbed of their freedom of expression, dignity, and hope for society (Biesta 1998; Hinchey 1998; Brookfield 2003; Viskovic 2006; Schaps 2009). These scholars argue that for critical pedagogy to have an impact, transformative learning is an important space in which discourse can change the way an individual reaches a new understanding of something that causes a fundamental paradigm shift. Emanating from these latter reflections, this paper explores theories underpinning this study

conducted in teaching Economics education to enhance critical communities of practice in the classroom. Moreover Bettez (2008) is of the view that the challenges we face in building critical communities of practice is an important virtue of society, in particular, enhancing critical student communities of practice. Several critical theories have emerged that can help us clarify what “critical” signifies. Simpson (2010) adroitly uncovers what being critical entails, through a description of the themes found in the main tenets of critical race theory, critical pedagogy and critical communication pedagogy. Hooks (2003) argues that it is crucial to build strong teacher-student relationships in classes. The promotion of teacher learning communities in teacher education programmes is growing in popularity, and the researcher contends that nurturing such communities is crucial, especially within the South African education system. Scholars argue that the purpose of critical community of practice work is to create nurturing spaces within which we can interdependently and collectively read the world through a critical lens which challenges domination, encourages thoughtful questions and recognises that people operate with values and cultural assumptions that are informed by historical and socio-political contexts (Shor 1992; Kincheloe 2007).

Cultural Diversity in Teaching and Learning

Culture is an ubiquitous, complex and universal phenomenon, since every community has its own culture that separates it from others. This is especially pertinent within an African context (van Wyk 2014). Baker and Clark (2010) define culture as, ‘a set of human-made objective and subjective components that historically increased the probability of survival of a specific community.’ In the context of this paper, the ecological environment is a culturally diverse open distance learning classroom situation where Economics student teachers have been assigned to practice teaching. Student teachers from culturally diverse groupings and with different learning abilities can be found within this space. As indicated earlier, cultural diversity is a complex construct that can be defined in different ways depending on the context. In this study, interrelated factors significant to teaching and learning are adopted to define culture and diversity.

Cultural diversity covers a wide range of dimensions and can be defined as a representation of differences in terms of race, ethnicity, heterogeneity, physical features and attitude (Ranaivoson 2007). Cultural diversity is strongly supported by the South African school curriculum as it states that education should bring about social transformation and promote inclusivity and sensitivity to issues of diversity such as poverty, inequality, race, gender, language, age, and disability (DBE 2012: 5). It embraces a body of knowledge created by diverse people. The researcher posits that cultural diversity is a dynamic, creative and continuous process of sharing and learning from one another. In the context of this paper, teachers therefore take into cognisance both the explicit and implicit forms of culture. Student teachers share knowledge and resources and influence one another to adopt certain behavioural aspects, values, attitudes and learning styles, thereby also creating their own group culture of learning.

Samovar et al. (2010) explains that individualism as a cultural value embraces individuals as important entities within a society, promoting independence rather than interdependence and rewarding individual achievement. Collectivism, on the other hand, is defined as a cultural value that emphasises the views, needs and goals of the group over those of individuals and therefore encourages interdependence more than independence. Culturally relevant pedagogy argues that learners should be empowered to scrutinise if what they are learning is relevant toward creating a democratic and multicultural society. Learners should be able to identify how the inclusion of culture in the curriculum can assist them to comprehend the fabric and the socio-political nature of their society. When these attributes are understood, students are able to develop the motivation to acquire cultural knowledge pertaining to their own cultural ways and systems (Milner 2001; van Wyk 2013).

Social Interdependence as a “Glue” Towards Embracing Social Relationship

The social interdependence theory was developed by Kurt Lewin. He refined Koffka’s notions while stating that the essence of a group is the interdependence among members (created by common goals), and that an intrinsic state of tension among group members motivates move-

ment toward the accomplishment of the desired common goals. Social interdependence exists when individuals share common goals and each individual's outcomes are affected by the actions of the others (Johnson and Johnson 1989).

Social interdependence theory provides a foundation on which cooperative learning is built. It is one of the most successful and widespread theories applied to education practice within the context of social and educational psychology (Johnson and Johnson 2009; van Wyk 2013). Social interdependence occurs when the individuals' actions affect others' achievement of outcomes, including their own (Johnson and Johnson 2009). According to Smith and Berge (2009) there are two types of social interdependence, namely positive (cooperation) and negative (competition). Positive interdependence implies that individuals understand that they can reach their goals only if the other persons with whom they are cooperatively grouped, for example in teaching practice groups, also achieve their goals. Members of Economics teams are expected to be supportive of one another's efforts to achieve the expected team and individual aims of performing well in class and improving their academic achievement. Social interdependence is therefore manifested when student teachers believe that they will obtain their intended outcomes only if those to whom they are competitively linked obtain their goals.

Embracing Communities of Practice as a Space for Situated Learning

This paper is underpinned by the constructs of social interdependence and community of practice. The notion *community of practice* was developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991) as the basis of a social theory of learning. The basic argument presented by Lave and Wenger is that communities of practice are everywhere and that we are generally involved in a number of them, be it at work, school, home, or in our civic and leisure interests. Lave and Wenger (1991) wrote:

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a

network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope.

A community of practice can therefore be regarded as a group of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavour.

In the context of this paper, communities of practice are Economics student teachers who share their passion for practicing teaching and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly with fellow student teachers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In applying a critical ethnographical enquiry approach, the researcher rethinks challenges and draws from diverse Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) student voices in creating collective learning conversations in the Economics education class. This design provides the opportunity for close contact with participants. Denzin (1999) is of the view that ethnography should articulate identifiable cultural diversity and political challenges, including injustices based upon race, class, power, gender and ethnicity. The researcher has a critical responsibility to acknowledge, respect and understand student teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds. In the Economics education classroom environment, where culturally diverse students are represented, ethnography is an important tool to aid understanding of different cultural backgrounds and beliefs. A cultural-sociological form of ethnography helps the researcher and the student teachers to step outside their immediate personal constraints in order to examine one another's social world through new eyes.

Marton (1994) defined ethnography as, "the empirical study of the differing ways in which people experience, perceive, apprehend, understand and conceptualize various phenomena in any aspect of the world around us". The goal is to adopt an unbiased approach in order to observe and decipher patterns and consistencies that emerge from the challenges the researcher faces and from students' experiences in culturally diverse settings, and to observe how they understand, perceive, and describe various phenomena arising from their experiences in the Economics education classroom. It seeks to describe the conceptions of any phenomenon by indi-

viduals to generate different variations in the way of experiencing it (Le Fevre 2011).

Participants

The participants were final-year PGCE student teachers placed at different schools, completing their teaching practice period as well as a research assignment on community engagement. The researcher's experiences in the classroom, particularly those with PGCE Economics education students (n=349), are explored. As part of the year mark for the SDEC00N (Subject Teaching Methodology Economics) module, students were required to complete a compulsory research assignment on community engagement.

Gathering Data

Ethnographic interviewing and other data collection tools are employed. According to Gray (2014), ethnographic interviewing encourages interviewees to shape the questions being asked and possibly even the focus of the study, resulting in data being co-produced by the interviewees and interviewer. To augment the stories, the researcher elicited some students' opinions on sustainable community building via e-mails, telephonic interviews and blog postings, and obtained permission to incorporate comments from students' subject-reflective assignments. The voices of the Economics education students served to guide the reflective process of critically analysing the student teachers' challenges and experiences in creating collective learning conversations and their thoughts about community building. Themes and subthemes emerged from the different sets of data gathered.

Ethical Considerations

Before the researcher could begin with the study, consent was obtained from the participating students. The researcher had decided beforehand to use pseudonyms for each of the students who participated in the study. The researcher explained the purpose of confidentiality to the students, who then agreed to participate in the study. The researcher chose these PGCE subject method students because they represent a particular social class, ethnicity, race and cultural grouping. The researcher was surprised to discover that the students did not want to be kept anonymous. They regarded their crit-

ical voices as public testimony and stated that they were looking forward to seeing their personal discourses as part of the research paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several challenges were identified in the process of creating learning conversations with the student teachers.

Breaking the Challenge of Isolation, and Creating Empowering Teaching and Learning Sessions

The researcher reflected critically on the use of teaching methods and decided to change teaching strategies in order to create collective learning spaces. The challenge was to accommodate the culturally diverse digital generation in teaching at all levels. The researcher planned activities with the ultimate purpose of cultivating citizenship in a democratic order where decision-making is based on rational evidence fundamental to stability and sustainable development. While planning teaching activities, the researcher realized that social justice and fairness are foundational precepts of a transforming society, and that it was a huge challenge to incorporate these precepts in the classroom, especially in an open distance learning environment.

Student teachers often experience teaching as isolated, challenging, and individualistic. The purpose of this paper was to develop learning communities capable of sustaining students as individuals, as well as building communities of practice (Hall 2007; Schaps 2009). The researcher's focus in this paper was on specific challenges encountered in fostering critical communities among colleagues and Economics education students. The researcher alluded to challenges faced during his early teaching practice days:

It is a time-consuming process to plan and prepare your lesson as a beginner teacher but students are not thankful for all your efforts. Sometimes you doubt your own abilities. You provided to your students and sent them feedback but still it was not "good" enough as an example of your lecturing work. The constructive feedback on our assignments was very informative to correct our mistakes. We really appreciated the efforts of our lecturer.

Pyhältö et al. (2009) noted that many students complained that they studied alone, most often wrote alone, usually taught alone, and frequently thought and processed alone during their teaching practice. However, one of the students participating in this study responded as follows on the issue of conversations and on contemporary Economics topics:

Our lecturer started “dialogical conversations” in our class. I like this type of teaching strategy. He introduced contemporary economic topics on unemployment and crime in our country. I support these efforts such as class discussions and debating sessions. These in-class sessions promote critical reflections amongst us. Sometimes he uses daily newspaper articles relating to education in our classes or on the blog to respond to. What I realise is that these newspaper articles stimulate critical reflections in building critical learning communities.

One particular book entitled *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Bonilla-Silva 2006) really stimulated and challenged the researcher’s viewpoint about “race”. In the book, the author reflects on the concept “racism” and even asked the question whether this phenomenon is still alive and well in most societies. The author believed that we all keep talking about racism but nothing had been done constructively. The author warned us not to use racism as a crutch! The author goes on by saying that “*Race is a myth, an invention, a socially constructed category. Therefore, we should not make it ‘real’ by using it in our analyses. People are people, not black, white, or Indian. White males are just people*” (Bonilla-Silva 2006). In the researcher’s classroom all students were fairly and equally treated in discussions of topic of “racism” and “xenophobia” attached on foreigners. We must therefore educate our student teachers to look past the illness of the oppressed system and create spaces of critical engagement of these issues. Moreover, Gay (2000) argues that graduate students of colour often encounter discrimination, hostility, isolation, tokenism and marginality. The researcher confirmed experiencing this during the early years of his career as a subject teacher and as an academic.

The researcher decided to assist and support Economics education students in creating

critical communities to counterbalance feelings of isolation and frustration. These conversational communities may be especially crucial for the success of students who are not part of the dominant culture, and in particular of those who are in the minority in classes.

Demands of Studying at an Open Distance Learning Institution

Some students expressed serious concern about this issue. One student stated:

I was sometimes confused and felt stressed about writing my assignment but it was not enough. I experienced how other students always complain about the marking of assignments and other teaching practice sessions over a twenty-week period.

Another student responded as follows:

I decided not to complain but to convert my challenges into positive outcomes. I decided not to listen to any negative complaints by fellow students. At the beginning of my teaching practice sessions I struggled to get a mentor to help me. I viewed this as a short-term setback. I decided to work harder and I believed that I would meet all the requirements for finishing my teaching practice weeks.

Lobnibe (2004) conducted a postgraduate study and concurred that most students and colleagues experienced unfair and discriminatory practices during their teaching practice sessions. Several scholars highlighted a number of challenges faced by students who did not have English as their first language, by students who did not attend intellectually rigorous undergraduate programmes, and by many other non-traditional students who felt the effects of unfair practices (Hooks 2000; Gray 2004; Lobnibe 2009). Research studies conducted on emotional work involved in learning about social foundational issues of how privilege and oppression operate in society are highlighted by Kumashiro (2004), Boler (2003) and Hooks (1994).

One student noted the huge demands made of students studying at an open distance learning institution. She said:

I experienced that, in the beginning, assignment writing was an emotionally taxing experience. I could, as a black student, relate to all these challenges faced during the year. I support my lecturer to provide us with an enabling environment for professional development.

According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) as well as Hall (2007), students should learn to be “multi-voiced”, to vary how they express themselves depending on context and to whom they are speaking. He argues that “being multi-voiced in this way means being aware of our conversation partners’ needs and placing their need to understand above our own desire to express ourselves in intellectually self-serving ways”. Delpit (2006) and Nichols (2004) argue that some privileged students (generally white students), by virtue of past experiences and access to the “culture of power”, are better equipped than others (usually underprivileged African students) to learn and engage in various academic discourses.

The researcher’s stance is that the creation of critical communities in Economics education will promote collective teaching and learning where peers who are more versed in academic discourse and in academic codes of power will be encouraged to use multi-voices to assist less experienced students.

Creating Conducive Learning Spaces to Support Culturally Diverse Students

The researcher endeavoured to create a classroom atmosphere conducive to critical thinking, where students are expected to fulfill high expectations, make personal connections to the newspaper readings during class discussions and take ownership of their learning process. One of the central contentions of this paper is the importance of building critical and creative communities in the classroom. Although the researcher believes it is essential to build critical and collective learning communities that extend *beyond* the classroom, assisting students to build critical communities can, and perhaps must, first begin *in* the classroom.

In a modular reflective assignment in which students were asked to describe what they had been learning in the module, a female student teacher linked her undergraduate experience in Economics education to the particular reflective assignment. She ended her reflection by stating:

I really enjoyed your controversial sessions on corruption in the country. I experienced a freedom of expression; I felt the “comradeship”, I really treasured the debates on contemporary issues of economic injustice and privilege,

which made sense. I look forward to continuing my struggle-ridden transformation. I expect significant development as a result of the past eight weeks and know development will continue throughout my life. I also sense something else happening. I realise my struggle is not an individual struggle. My struggle is joining with others’ struggles.

This understanding of the struggle being collective, and not individual, is reinforced by a number of sociologically oriented authors, who emphasise that there is always a degree of interplay between individuals and groups and between people and institutions. The students interviewed for this paper indicated that a sense of being collective comes about through classroom community.

Jawitz (2009b) conducted a study entitled, *Learning in the academic workplace: The harmonization of the collective and individual habitus*. This particular study inspired the researcher to create opportunities for the Economics education students to reflect critically on their experiences in the classroom. As part of the semester module mark, students are expected to complete a compulsory research assignment on community engagement. Through this assignment, Economics education students explore why women in rural communities engage in entrepreneurial activities. The students assisted in co-designing a survey for collecting data. One of the students remarked:

I felt empowered and enjoyed your session on how to design a questionnaire to collect data for the purpose of conducting our research. I understood how women in rural communities struggle to earn a living. I appreciated how this module was constructed to support and empower us in community involvement.

The researcher views this particular activity as an empowerment strategy to enhance students’ research skills. As part of the exercise, students were expected to write collaboratively as groups. They could identify critical readers as valuable sounding boards for their writing. After submission of their research assignments, groups received constructive feedback from the researcher on whether they had achieved the objectives of the project.

Starting Critical Reading Groups

Biesta (1998) as well as Hooks (2003) conducted studies in which they introduced critical

reading groups in the lecturer room to stimulate critical discourse on contemporary issues. In the context of this study, the researcher introduced critical reading groups in order to empower students to engage collaboratively on current issues in relation to the study units in the subject module. Students could choose to be part of a reading group linked to a compulsory Economics education assignment.

According to Hytten and Warren (2003) such readings help students build critical pedagogy discourses among themselves. Students submitted their assignments for assessment and the researcher provided constructive feedback indicating how their work could be improved. The researcher views this process as one of building learning communities in the class and as an integrated process within and outside the classroom.

While working on this paper, the researcher sent bulk e-mails to students asking for feedback on their assignment experiences of building community in classes. One of the male students, responded as follows:

I have felt a sense of community within your classes more than in most of the other courses I have taken (at the faculty and my schools). I think a lot of it has to do with your idea of both teaching and "studenting" and the responsibility of the students in your class to be partners in the process. There are amazing "A-ha!" moments, such as the simulated Economics games, or those during the last semester when we used role-playing of certain articles to express themes.

The above student teacher named several teaching and learning strategies and techniques that could lead to community building in the classroom. These are outlined in greater detail below.

Students as Partners in Collective Learning

Making students partners in the process of teaching and learning can contribute to a cohesive classroom community. A real teacher-student relationship, as partners in collective learning, can only be established if the teacher as the "power holder" creates dialogical spaces for his/her students to grow academically, emotionally and socially (Bettez 2008; Cranton 2006). The researcher sees his class as an empowering collective learning space. In this learning space, a powerful learning environment is created to pro-

mote a sense of belonging and build sound teacher-student relationships for collective learning. In such an environment, students take responsibility for their learning, seize opportunities to teach others, and utilise their knowledge to effect change. We sometimes team-teach and peer-teach on economic justice issues, such as poverty or unemployment, and build relationships long after the classroom practice is over. One student reflected as follows on collective learning:

I am a reflective student teacher; I must be conscientious about my praxis. I must be sure to emphasise the importance of critical reading and creating space for my students to share and theorise personal experiences. I think through very carefully about not only what I hope to cover in a class, but how, because I realize that the pedagogy and subject content is important.

Flexibility in specific lesson plans enables the researcher to respond to unexpected student needs. In one instance, for example, the group wanted to explore unemployment, and a lesson on the topic was therefore planned together.

In order to foster a sense of investment in and responsibility for the classroom community, the researcher often encouraged students to collectively create class ground rules to guide their interactions. Asking students to invest in the teaching and learning process requires that the researcher too, invest in and respond to their needs. The researcher elicits feedback and input from students on content and pedagogy, continually emphasising that teaching and learning in the classroom involves partnership. Receiving and responding to student feedback, through formal (mid-semester) evaluations and consultations (via email responses and individual meetings), is one way to mediate the power differential (Jawitz 2009). In addition, the researcher provides lengthy feedback to individual assignments, making it as clear as possible how the students' work was assessed and why they received a particular mark. This allows students the opportunity to respond to, and at times, challenge the assessment. Several students have visited the researcher's office to discuss his responses to their assignments. These are often pivotal moments; in the best circumstances they lead to an increased awareness for all and they promote connection. This teacher-

student relationship in Economics education is an example of a partnership that serves as a model for building critical communities in our classrooms.

Integrating Interactive and Participative Classroom Activities

A lot of thought goes into coupling and organising interactive newspaper readings and collective activities, as the researcher is conscientious about what to promote in a reflective approach in the Economics classroom. A number of different activities are utilised that encourage students to engage intellectually and emotionally with the readings. The researcher incorporates a variety of edutainment-based activities, including performances, drawings and Economics games. For example, students are asked to create visual images or mind-maps that represent economic justice theories, or create performances that parallel moral dilemmas raised in teacher narratives (personal stories). Two female students noted:

We enjoy your edutainment strategies and contemporary newspaper clippings as very effective activities. It supports our learning styles; it promotes accountability and shared learning amongst students. We are together as a collective in learning. We are working as a team by sharing and reflecting on our experiences.

The researcher uses these activities not only to cater for distinct learning styles, promote joy in learning and elicit critical thinking, but also to promote collective engagement with content, requiring students to work with and learn from one another. Such activities can be incorporated specifically to emphasise community, particularly in moments of conflict in the classroom. For example, following a particularly difficult class dialogue about racism, where some students shared deep words of pain and others shed tears, the researcher allowed students to record their thoughts and emotions. From this there emerged a collective learning experience about how to deal with gender stereotyping, which eventually led to an activity inspired by Boler (2003) as well as Renner (2009), where students were required to work together to craft a collective image with their bodies that represented community building. This process demonstrated that collective work could continue, even in the face of conflict. Through the image creation

and discussion, students analysed what community building entails and why it is important.

Integrated interactive Economics group activities help break down barriers between students by encouraging them to work collaboratively. Such activities also promote interaction between teachers and students, who often develop closer relationships after working together in unprovoked ways. If we wish to promote community in our classrooms, we must be conscientious about our pedagogy and deliberate in our efforts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper the researcher has attempted to frame each of the practices outlined above with a focus on how they can be used to promote critical communities. Collective learning conversations were explored by drawing from the challenges and experiences of student teachers teaching Economics in a culturally diverse setting. Students indicated that it is a challenge to break through the sense of isolation, and create empowering teaching and learning sessions, but the process created an opportunity for them to reflect on online views. Critical communities also provided a platform for starting critical reading groups in the subject. Students came to view each other as partners in the collective learning environment. Communities of practice were created by Economics student teachers who shared their passion for doing teaching practice through open distance learning and learned how to do it better as they interacted regularly with fellow student teachers. In building Economics education learning communities, it was important to create critical learning spaces as a way to enhance culturally diverse student populations. Without community we will not be sustained as we engage in this socially isolating, intellectually challenging, worldview expanding, and emotionally demanding profession.

This paper addresses the promotion of pedagogical practices in general: incorporating students as partners at all levels of the teaching and learning process; utilising creative activities in the classroom that promote collaboration and critical thought; teaching with compassion; encouraging students to acknowledge the connection between emotion and intellect; and conscientiously facilitating discussions that urge students to critically self-reflect on their experi-

ences, and be responsible for acting compassionately with their peers. It was found that integrated interactive Economics group activities help to break down barriers between students by encouraging them to work in collaboration with one another. Such activities also promote interaction between teachers and students who often, by working together in unprovoked ways, develop closer relationships.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper identifies a number of practical ways in which teachers can create collective learning conversations in the classroom and beyond. It is important that teachers create community awareness outside the classroom, as this can often fall by the wayside when focusing on opportunities for learning. Students should be assisted to create informal as well as formal critical communities that extend beyond the classroom.

We need to create and instill in our student teacher a sense of self-awareness as a crucial key to becoming culturally competent. This means that effective, culturally competent student teachers must make an effort to become aware of their own cultural biases and assumptions and encourage their students to do the same. Awareness and acknowledgment of difference rather than assumption of similarity can be a first step toward creating a supportive classroom community that “fosters feelings of membership and inclusion, promotes positive self-image, and enhances self-concept”. Awareness of differences can also help teachers and learners avoid stereotyping, prejudice and ethnocentrism. Teachers can help foster awareness of difference by inviting all students to share their expectations and experiences early on through activities, readings and assignments. Another practical way to enhance the hidden culturally awareness is to integrate culturally sensitive assignments, cultural games, role-plays focusing on other cultural events, critical debates about “race” and “culture”.

In conclusion, a number of strategies are recommended for creating collective learning spaces within and beyond the classroom. Informal critical communities can be nurtured through conversations between colleagues, discussions and reflections about teaching and learning, phone calls to critical readers, check-ins with

peers, collegial conversations on challenging community issues and academic networking at conferences. In addition to informal critical communities, formal critical communities can be promoted by establishing a tutors’ forum for critical engagement; critical and transformative practices in professional learning communities; the establishment of a critical friends group; critical reading groups; collaborative enquiry writing; constructing critical literature review groups; working with groups on panel presentations; enhancing supervisor-student relationships; creating a community of learners through internet-based collectives and social networking e-tools like Facebook, Twitter, and email; making use of teleconferencing; and using blogs to enhance critical reflection. By utilising student voices and self-reflecting critically on challenges, the researcher has attempted to demonstrate why we need to help and empower students to foster critical communities within and beyond the classroom.

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