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ABSTRACT

A teacher education seminar, designed to be an egalitarian "community of learners," is critiqued. In an effort to make classroom learning relations more equal, instructors referred to themselves as seminar leaders and sought student participation in the curriculum decision-making process. The most significant consequence of the egalitarian approach may have been the atomization of seminar participants. Class readings, the literature review, and discussion of philosophical and methodological issues, when taken up, were in the context of in-class dissertation discussion. The effective displacement of common readings and emphasis on individual presentations of doctoral research allowed individual students to move in their own directions. Neither students nor course instructors raised the issue of student participation in evaluation. Not giving students a voice in structuring student evaluation was an arrangement that seemed to go against the egalitarian structure of the seminar. Comments from the students indicated that the seminar gave expression to real grievances in the participants' lives as students and as teachers. However, the form the seminar took was ultimately an obstacle to more fully understanding the grievances expressed. While valorizing individual voices and curriculum empowerment will continue to be important, such an approach requires a critical perspective that grasps how larger structures determine classroom practice. (Contains 16 references.) (LH)

Interactive Symposium

Community of Learners: Navigating the Muddy Waters of Communality and Divergence in a Doctoral Seminar in Teacher Education



# A CLASSROOM OF INDIVIDUALS? RECONSIDERING THE FORMS OF COMMUNITY IN A SEMINAR IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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## Introduction

In this paper I provide a critical analysis of the course in teacher education taught by Gaalen and Tony. My principal contribution will be to identify what the course's main objective was. For reasons I will explain, the nature of our course makes such an identification problematic, and, from a certain standpoint, even undesirable. My justification for attempting to do so is ultimately pragmatic: I seek to determine what practical lessons might be drawn from this course, from the perspective of someone looking for alternative approaches to classroom learning. My critique will thus hopefully be of use for others seeking to do the same.

Art's typification of the seminar, used for this symposium's title, as being a teacher-initiated effort to establish a "community of learners," is a good place to begin. I find the typification useful because with it Art clearly tries to make explicit the sort of principle that guided the otherwise diverse activities of a fairly large seminar (16 students). It is also a problematic typification, one whose very impulse has been questioned by most of the participants in this symposium (meeting, January 27, 1997). It seems their concern is less the particular phrase than the very effort at naming. Being defined as a "community" is acceptable for them only insofar as its referent remains indeterminate and so nonbinding. Their position is that our seminar ultimately included as many seminars as there were participants, making any attempt to give it a single name at best beside the point, at worse oppressive, metaphysical, and exclusionary.

Still, it seems to me that some such typification should be made, if we are to share our experience with others interested in learning from it. In any event, it will be my contention that some such typification at least *can* be made: however individual-specific this seminar experience, I believe a single structuring principle was in play.

What, then, is a minimal typification of what our seminar -- or seminar of many seminars -- attempted to achieve?

I believe the seminar was distinguished by a concerted effort to transform the relations of learning in the classroom by making them more egalitarian. Certainly Gaalen and Tony demonstrated this desire, for instance, by referring to themselves as seminar leaders or discussion facilitators, rather than as instructors. Likewise, and more tellingly, they worked systematically to ensure that students were involved in various curricular decisions. Thus if the course sought any one thing it was to make relations of learning in the classroom more egalitarian by involving students directly in what they are often excluded from: the process of making decisions on curriculum.

Following Carolyn Williams (1993) I have identified four key decision areas within the curricular process: 1) what to learn, 2) how to learn it, 3) what the learning outcome is to be, and 4) how the learning outcome should be assessed.[1] In what follows I shall examine how and to what extent this egalitarian principle of shared decision making was extended into these areas. I shall discuss what the immediate consequences were in each case for the seminar itself as well as some implications for others interested in considering such an alternative learning practice. I will then conclude by speculating more broadly on what sorts of needs seminars like ours are likely to express given the current educational climate, and whether an alternative form may be more desirable.

## Part One: A community of individuals

The first three of Williams' areas -- the what, the how, and the why of learning -- are ineluctably intertwined, so I will discuss them together, leaving the area of evaluation for Part Two.

The process of deciding what to learn and how to learn it was a rather open one. Gaalen and Tony's course description set the stage. In it three fields were identified for course inquiry: a literature review in teacher education, philosophical and methodological

[1] I have chosen to make reference to Williams' (1993) article because she has adult learners in mind when identifying these four curricular areas.

issues in education research, and each student's current work on their dissertation. The course description did not include a list of seminal works in the field of teacher education nor a week-by-week breakdown of course readings. Instead, Gaalen and Tony usually brought in a suggested reading one meeting before it was to be discussed; otherwise, we were encouraged to make suggestions for any further readings.

So, what were the consequences of de-emphasizing a preformed syllabus and leaving some curriculum content decisions in the hands of students? First, only two students actually brought in readings, one apiece; the majority continued to be set by Gaalen and Tony. Course reading, or at least its number and content, was therefore not a curricular area where student freedom was really exercised, except perhaps as the freedom not to do much reading. Which leads to the second consequence: for it turned out that course readings and in-class discussion of them took on an (at most) secondary importance in terms of the what and how of our course curriculum. In absolute terms, there were only a dozen essays assigned in the course, for a total page count that in my experience is quite light for a graduate seminar. In relative terms, and more significantly, the preponderance of in-class time came instead to be given over to student presentations of dissertation research (including a follow-up period for questions and answers).

As the course progressed, some students including myself grew frustrated with the fact that what little reading was being assigned was often not being discussed. (At one point, two consecutive meetings passed without a single reading being taken up.) On two separate occasions suggestions were made to move discussion of the readings to the beginning of the each class, so that they would not be preempted by presentations of dissertation research. However, after a temporary change along these lines, the class format soon reverted to one where readings were at most secondary. Eventually it became clear that several students were not reading what few readings were assigned, making them incidental even when they were actually discussed. Clearly, there was a conflict in time allotted to readings and dissertation research. But a majority of the seminar members

appeared to prefer to leave plenty of opportunity to discuss the latter; in any event, the issue itself of time allotment was never explicitly addressed: the relative distribution simply evolved.

It would thus seem that the freedom to shape both the content of the curriculum and the mode of its learning resulted in making current student research the focus of the seminar. Among other things this meant that the other two elements in Gaalen and Tony's course outline -- literature review and discussion of philosophical and methodological issues -- were taken up if at all in the context of in-class dissertation discussion or independent work for course papers and the like. Addressing them became more or less voluntary.

Corresponding to the in-class curricular emphasis on individual research projects, students were each given the freedom to decide how they would demonstrate their learning outcome. Gaalen and Tony suggested we write two papers, but beyond that, questions regarding what those papers addressed and the form they might take were individually negotiated.

Perhaps the most important consequence of this egalitarian approach was the atomization -- or reinforced individuation -- of the seminar members. With the effective displacement of common readings, and the emphasis on individual presentations of doctoral research, the seminar allowed individual students to move in their own directions. The question and answer period following the presentations was another case in point: its running left largely in the presenter's hands, discussion often became perfunctory and formal, unless the presenter felt willing, for instance, to raise philosophical and methodological discussions pertaining to their research. Thus I believe it is fair to say that whatever community our seminar realized existed only "insofar as it serve[d] all of its members as individuals" (Berlin, 1988, p. 486). Making the curricular decision-making process more egalitarian thus meant the learning community was consistently subordinated to each individual's needs. As a result the seminar was a congenial place where students

could count on developing their "own voice" (an often heard phrase), getting a sympathetic hearing, and learning largely on their own terms.

In terms of broader implications for prospective practitioners of such an approach, I would suggest there are three important lessons to be derived. First, making the curricular decision-making process more egalitarian means spending a lot of time discussing the logistics and mechanics of the course. Teachers and students need to have the time and the patience for such an undertaking.

Second, the curricular emphasis on individual student projects, consequent on democratizing the curricular decision-making process and so downplaying teacher expertise, could be a poor choice for a teacher who has a specific body of literature he/she believes students must encounter.

Third, the curricular deemphasis of assigned readings and their in-class discussion, again consequent on democratizing the curricular decision-making process and downplaying teacher expertise, could be frustrating for students who anticipated or prefer a more traditional approach to a learning community, an approach which seeks to help develop every member's understanding of an established field of study through common readings and writing projects.

## Part Two: The other, wider community

In a seminar where students were otherwise encouraged and eager to take the initiative, their virtual absence from the process of evaluation appears an anomaly. To my knowledge, the possibility of students participating in their own evaluation was never raised, nor was student exclusion from this process ever challenged. Thus one of the striking aspects of what I am calling an anomaly was that it was not experienced as such. How then *was* evaluation experienced and what form did its discussion take?

There were three class sessions during which grading was discussed. In the first (September 7, 1995), Gaalen proposed a grade distribution that weighted the second of the seminar's two papers more heavily than the first (60-40). In the second session (November 9, 1995), Gaalen invited students to determine whether our first paper's grade would appear as a letter grade or as a percentage out of 100. He and Tony also outlined their evaluative criteria, pertaining principally to the clarity of writing and the coherence of argument. In the third and final grading-related session (March 14, 1996), Gaalen and Tony invited students to "brainstorm" appropriate evaluative criteria for the final paper. Since students appeared somewhat at a loss as to where to begin, Tony proposed what he deemed appropriate criteria, to which general agreement was given promptly.[2]

What strikes me as peculiar about the exchanges in these three class sessions is that the level of discussion remained largely technical, leaving in tact the conventional arrangement of teacher evaluating student. Why did we not consider other possible arrangements such as self-evaluation, peer evaluation, participatory evaluation, or combinations of the above? And why was this not seen as compromising the seminar's egalitarian principle? After all, students were asked to share responsibility in several other respects. Why was this not extended to evaluation?

Time constraints and past experiences were undoubtedly factors, at least from the perspective of the seminar leaders. In a recent conversation with me, Gaalen confirmed as much, indicating how past efforts to adopt peer evaluation and participatory grading proved very time consuming and ultimately unsatisfactory (March 3, 1997). And yet however

[2] These criteria consisted of the following: clarity, consistency, coherence, cogency, correctness, coverage, and critical. It is significant that these criteria largely pertain to writing ability rather than knowledge of a given field. Furthermore, what these criteria really evaluate is not a student's development over the course of this particular seminar, but her overall achievement to date as a doctoral student. This is consistent with the seminar's emphasis on individual students' research projects, but the question remains whether it is desirable to make such a comprehensive evaluation in the name of a particular course.

determinant this or other precedents might have been,[3] they were left undiscussed as justification for the evaluation format of our seminar.

More interesting, perhaps, was the lack of interest shown by students in challenging this arrangement. One reason might be that whereas the curricular decision areas that *were* shared presumed an egalitarianism among seminar participants, in the area of evaluation students had to acknowledge the teachers' expertise, at least as far as actual grading was concerned. This seems to indicate that there were limits to student freedom regarding curricular decisions and that these became evident once students acknowledged, if indirectly, the limits of their capacity. (In fact, a few students had expressly acknowledged their limits in other curricular areas. For instance, myself and one other student discussed how ill-prepared we felt to suggest class readings, expecting instead Gaalen and Tony to make those decisions.) Likewise the fact that Gaalen and Tony did not insist on establishing joint responsibility for evaluation may mean they also reached the limits of what they believed they could do regarding the curricular extension of the egalitarian principle.

In retrospect, I believe it would have been possible and beneficial to discuss grading practices, particularly as an instance of the embeddedness of our seminar in an institutional setting. Grading student performance is currently mandated by most educational institutions, and as such, it tends to be a central concern for many teachers once in the field (Placier, 1995). Given that our seminar was a course in *teacher* education, it could have been an opportunity to highlight the teacher's institutional role and its relation to their pedagogical activities.

Why, then, were these issues suppressed in our seminar, a seminar which encouraged everyone to be expressive, empowered, and self-reflective? At this point I can only speculate, but it is possible that discussing grading would have made uncomfortably vivid

[3] For further discussion of participatory evaluation in terms of student empowerment, see Auerbach, 1996. A recent course at the University of British Columbia, Educational Studies 591, a graduate seminar in feminist and other epistemologies, implemented peer evaluation.

the limits to making learning relations in the university seminar more egalitarian. The fact that two seminar members acted as evaluators of all other members ran contrary to a notion in which we were heavily invested: that we as members were all, equally, learners. The issue of grading, in fact, made clear that there were at least two separate "communities" in play: the community we talked about, our "community of learners," and an institutionally authorized community that we never mentioned, what has been called the "authoritative community" (Bruffee, 1993, p. 131), represented by two of the "learners" and manifest in their procedures of evaluation. With due appreciation for what our seminar did in fact achieve, an egalitarianism that does not name and address such limits is likely to remain circumscribed in ways it does not see, a point I will return to in my conclusion.

Regarding lessons for prospective practitioners, I would suggest the following can be derived. First, as a teacher, clarify with yourself, at the stage of course planning, how far your students are going to be involved in curricular decision making. Anticipate limits and possible consequences, and consider their educational value.[4]

Second, if you decide to place limits on student curricular freedom, consider doing so by winning student agreement through an explicit justification of your decision.[5]

If you decide to apply the egalitarian principle to all curricular decisions, make sure no curricular area is left out, including evaluation. If students want to take part in evaluations, time management becomes crucial. Also, you must, from the beginning, help students learn how to evaluate their own work. This will draw attention to teacher knowledge and experience in this area, something which however apparently contradictory to an egalitarian approach is likewise best explicitly addressed.

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[4] In addition to the present paper, the following studies are illustrative of the sorts of consequences one might anticipate in following an egalitarian curricular approach: Caplow & Kardash (1995) and Fishman & McCarthy (1995).

[5] Elbow (1983) outlines how a teacher always has to work to strike a balance between her gatekeeper function and her role as ally and coach to her students. Elbow reminds us, however, of the traditional separation between coach and gatekeeper functions as maintained in the tutor-examiner system in places like Oxford and Cambridge. In contrast, teachers on this continent are asked to resolve these potentially contradictory roles within a single position.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the egalitarianizing principle of our seminar in teacher education was the enthusiasm with which it was embraced. Today's conference papers generally provide testimony to this warm reception, as do several comments I recall from the seminar's final weeks, to the effect that participating in curricular decisions felt really "liberating," as did the "new experience" of being respected and taken seriously in a classroom. I take these and other comments to indicate that our seminar gave expression to very real grievances from our lives as students and teachers. I would like to conclude this paper, however, with the suggestion that the form this seminar took may not be adequate to the experiences evidently expressed through it, and that ultimately an alternative will have to be developed.

The two concepts that could be seen as structuring how we understood our seminar activities -- the learner as individual on the one hand, and the classroom as learning horizon on the other -- were, I believe, ultimately obstacles to more fully grasping the grievances being expressed, and so also to any effort to redress them. The individualism inclined us to consider our problems in particularistic, idiosyncratic terms, while the classroom focus obstructed consideration of conditioning factors outside its bounds. Such a narrow focus can be salutary, but by itself would be adequate only if the greatest threat to students were authoritarian teachers and arbitrary curriculum. On the contrary, my sense is that the challenges we in education face, and the sorts of anxieties and grievances given expression in our seminar, simply cannot be grasped in these terms alone.

I believe the conditions informing such feelings are not idiosyncratic at all and extend well beyond (though always back into) the classroom. In broad terms they are socio-cultural, political and economic in nature, and in the form of a short-list might include the following: intensifying pressures to vocationalize the relations of learning, increasingly hostile social recognition of teachers and formal schooling, massive cutbacks in public

funding, and overworked, underpaid, and rarely appreciated education personnel. Who wouldn't feel anxious and alienated, in need of some sort of sanctuary at the very least, while working as student or teacher in such a degrading environment?

My sense is that feelings of uncertainty, fear and anger will if anything intensify over the next months and years in all but the most charmed of educational institutions. Valorizing individual voices and rebuilding confidence through curricular empowerment will continue to be important. But I believe it is time that such an approach be rearticulated within a critical perspective that is nothing short of global.[6] What we sorely need is an approach that grasps how larger structures remain determinants of what we do. While polemics advocating such an approach abound (e.g., Ebert, 1996; Zavarzadeh, 1994), I believe we need to equip ourselves with analytical tools that enable us to grasp and explain this structure-action relationship.[7] Such analytical tools are essential for critiquing structures that effectively compromise as they constitute our pedagogical aspirations. Far from being given, natural, and therefore inalterable, these structures can and must be critiqued and transformed. Ultimately, developing a critical capacity that leads to socially transformative action is, I believe, what constitutes the fullest sense of empowerment.[8] Our present historical conjucture makes the need for such empowerment especially acute. Why not henceforth make its cultivation a first priority in teacher education seminars like our own?

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[6] Brian Fay (1987) provides an exemplary account of how to maintain a global perspective while formulating theories for social transformation. See his *Critical social science: Liberation and its limits*. For a grimly penetrating yet accessible account of what "globalization" will continue to mean, see Teeple (1995). For an exploration of the missions of the university and university teachers as situated in a larger societal context, see Escobar, et al. (1994).

[7] I have made a few first attempts to analyze our activities as teachers in terms of their institutional, cultural, and political economical determinants. In Kanada (1995b), I examined Japanese language textbooks as sites of the social reproduction of sexist and cultural essentialist ideologies. Similarly in Kanada (1996, 1995a), I discussed the dangerously reciprocal nature of a positivist epistemology structuring the relations of learning in the (Anglo-American) university on the one hand and a rampant neo-liberalism currently remarketizing social relations on the other.

[8] I have relied on Brian Fay (1987) for this conception of empowerment.

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