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Engaged Pedagogy and Journaling: A Pathway to Self-Transformation

“If I want to understand where race and gender, or race and age, or gender and class, intersect, I need to make it personal. If I want to feel enraged and motivated to take action, I need to personalize it. If, as bell hooks said, I want to ‘expand the circle of human concern’ I need to make an issue my issue. Being part of the solution means exactly this, to personalize and then put into practice the learning from this class, and understand that change starts now, it starts where I am, and it starts with me.”

Undergraduate student in the Women, Culture, and Leadership course

Introduction

Social roles, entrenched in our daily lives, shape identity. To allow for the examining of one’s identity at the intersection of gender, culture, and leadership, the experience of journaling became a pathway of reflection in the Women, Culture, and Leadership course (WCL) at Soka University, a private liberal arts university in Tokyo, Japan. The opening student quote eloquently captures the need and value of making learning personal. This teaching activity introduces journaling as one approach for personalizing learning, to finding one’s voice, examining one’s identity, and creating a deeper understanding of self, identity, and agency. Leadership studies have traditionally been defined by a western, male-centric definition (Northhouse, 2017). To introduce a cultural and gendered perspective into the leadership field required a reexamining of conscious and unconscious beliefs shaping one’s mindset and perspective. This teaching activity engages students in critical inquiry and praxis through the reflective activity of journaling.

Rationale

Central to hooks’ (1994) feminist pedagogy is engaged teaching and learning, a pathway that allows learner and teacher to actively question *what is* and *what must be*. This learning-teaching space examines the intersecting topics of gender, culture, and leadership by unlearning, learning, and relearning one’s understanding and experience of these three identities. Journaling, a process of finding one’s voice, and capturing one’s experience, proved to be a pathway for unlocking hooks’ “Engaged pedagogy [which] necessarily values student expression” (p. 20). This teaching activity illustrates how the engaged practice of journaling provides a learning space to question and reimagine society, power, and leadership through a cultural lens. The processes of questioning and reimagining are aligned with the key principles of feminist pedagogy (Webb et al., 2002). As a result, the emerging critical view and analysis of identity, beliefs, and socialization reflects how cultivating a questioning mind, while respecting one’s lived narrative, opens pathways of transformation for students.

First, the rationale for promoting journaling stems from the power of the written word for reflecting on one’s experience and understanding of the world. hooks (2013) shared how journaling allows an individual to engage in critical self-reflection and confrontation: “We write because language is the way we keep a hold on life. With words we experience our deepest understandings of what it means to be intimate. We communicate to connect, to know community” (p. 22). New knowledge emerges when learners employ their point of view as a reference point. As hooks shares, “writing is not an anchor that we mistakenly cling to so as not to drown. It is writing that truly rescues, that enables us to reach the shore, to recover” (p. 11).

Journaling based on hooks' engaged pedagogy has previously been utilized to connect to successful outcomes in students' practice of social change (Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011).

Second, the practice of journaling activates self-awareness that can lead to change in one's identity with self, others, power, and leadership. To examine agency and the process of transformation of women, Krause (2018) refuted the myth that women are passive actors or victims. New ways of recognizing agency, power, and solidarity were needed. Journaling was introduced as "an attempt to get students to think critically about their place in relation to the knowledge they gain and to transform their worldview fundamentally link[ing] knowledge, social responsibility, and collective struggle" (Mohanty, 1989, p. 192). hooks (2013) posited that the focus of engaged pedagogy is to develop this critical thinking in students. She shared, "Students do not become critical thinkers overnight. First, they must learn to embrace the joy and power of thinking itself. Engaged pedagogy is a teaching strategy that aims to restore students' will to think, and their will to be fully self-actualized" (p. 8). Journaling thus contributes to critical thinking and reflection.

Third, another aspect of engaged pedagogy is making learning relevant. When learning is personalized, a new conceptualization of identity emerges from self-reflection that requires connecting to one's history, memory, and emotion. First there is "deconstructing and dismantling...second is...building and constructing" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 17). Students are not blank slates or empty vessels and therefore fostering respect and acknowledgement of lived experiences is central to learning (Freire, 1970). The construction of a pedagogic subject is "a process of cultural nurturing, involving cultivating principles of pedagogic and democratic socialization in subjects" (Torres, 2008, p. 6). The aim of connecting to lived experiences is not to become fixed in the past, but rather to universalize the student's reference point. This supports the building of community within the classroom through engaging diverse voices, both written and spoken.

Learning Objectives

The main learning objectives of this teaching activity were to 1) engage in critical inquiry; 2) practice reflection; and 3) connect the relevance of one's experience to reimagining and creating new knowledge.

Explanation and Debriefing

Students were introduced to the class assignment of journaling during the second week of the semester. The instructions were to write for 15 minutes after class, reflecting on the experience of the class that day. The themes of the class included learning about women's leadership challenges and opportunities, cultural context, social identities, and unpacking a feminist perspective. Students were encouraged to connect to prompts such as: What did you feel during and after class? What touched you? What unsettled you? The focus was on their class experience. Students were encouraged to commit to 15 minutes of focused time, writing without attending to word length. Students asked if they could write for more than 15 minutes, and that certainly was permitted. After four weeks, students submitted their journal entries. There were three, four-week blocks of journaling assigned, for a total of 12 weeks of journal entries. After the first four-week block, written feedback was provided to each student, highlighting strengths of the depth of reflection in their entries.

To support students' understanding of writing reflections, prompts were suggested, and sample journal entries were shared. In line with hooks' (2013) approach to engaged pedagogy, students were repeatedly encouraged to ask themselves how the concepts introduced in class applied to their personal lives. Making these connections to their own experiences allowed insights and new questions to emerge.

Three examples of prompts are listed, followed by sample response text like those provided to students prior to their journaling.

1. Write about how to apply a concept to your experience and then reflect on a new insight or question.

“One takeaway was about people resisting female leadership. When I thought about women having to work double to be considered equally good as a man...I couldn't avoid thinking about my mother...I grew up seeing her being harassed and coming home crying...questioning if she was good enough to assume a higher position...she needed to learn what I'm learning... perhaps if she knew the system is a labyrinth she would have suffered less...Confidence plays an important role in leadership, and it is something I also still want to work on.”

2. Are you questioning the root of a problem? Write about it and what action you might take.

“In the discussion...some of us shared our own or our family's experiences...where women were denied the right to speak in public. Also, one of us talked about her own country, saying men, including young adults, tend to get scared of women's success. These stories then made me think about where these globally rooted ideas come from. I think it is domestic gender roles that shape the role models that women are forced to follow, thereby depriving women of the right to speak and the chance to succeed.”

3. What were new insights from the guest speaker/text/activity? How does this apply to your life?

“One of the things I learned is that to be an effective leader we need to understand the culture of the setting...unsuitable leadership will discourage us from our passion for our work, which leads to giving up easily. Frustration blending with diminished passion will only end up with adversity. Another takeaway is seizing opportunities. To be a leader, we need to decide to be a leader instead of passively accepting the role.”

During class, students engaged in small group discussions, and reflected on their understanding and relationship to topics such as implicit bias, power, feminist parenting, cultural influences, leadership, identity, and more. Students were encouraged to hold a space for the tension that was emerging. Directly acknowledging the tension and naming the emotions that were being experienced in class also modeled affirmatively the importance of a reflective practice. The emerging tension in one student journal entry was expressed as,

“I had a hard time understanding the concept and importance of knowing one's culture...My contradicting identities such as not being able to read Chinese characters to be called 'Chinese' enough or having difficulties to speak fluently in Malay to be called 'Malaysian' enough was one of the biggest factors that caused me to give up in

understanding more about myself. However, this intersectionality of my identity is what gives me depth and complexity as a human being.”

At the end of the semester, students were asked to submit a final reflective essay. Before writing this final essay, students were instructed to go back and read all their journal entries, sequentially. Then in the final essay students addressed the following three questions:

1. Describe how your understanding of self changed or developed related to the class topics throughout the semester.
2. Which class readings/videos/activities were most impactful and why?
3. In the future, what action will you take based on your learning in this course?

The first question captures past, present, and future, and serves to connect to what hooks (1994) describes as *what is* and *what must be*. The second question relates to a student’s ability to make meaning of class themes based on texts and experiential activities. The third question focuses on students’ ability to translate theory into action. A rubric based on these questions, with three criteria respectively, was shared with students to provide them with the scope of evaluation of the final essay. As an example of the criterion, for the first question on personal change and development, the description for an above average response was: In-depth analysis of connection of self-growth to class topics/experience with excellent examples provided demonstrating key points. A below average response description was: Superficial analysis of connection of self-growth to class topics, with no examples or few examples mentioned.

An Assessment of Transformation

It was important for students to see the change in their own voices as they worked to capture their learning experience. Their journals began to reflect the challenges they were experiencing— challenges to their self-identity, to the role culture played in their worldview, to the desire to want to emerge differently and yet feeling hindered by family, peer, and societal pressure. Student journal entries presented a critical view of identity, culture, and socialization.

Cultivating a questioning mind through a journaling experience captured a dynamic change of perspective and self, reflecting critical self-reflection and confrontation (hooks, 2013). Writing revealed an unprecedented agency in student lives, as students reimagined power, leadership, and identity. Furthermore, personal and purposeful leadership emerged as an individual’s prerogative to act and to contribute to others. Through reflection, students were able to situate themselves at the center as subjects of inquiry, as co-creators of knowledge. Through critical inquiry and reflection, students’ journaling revealed a process of reimagination in their minds. Shedding fears, they worked to craft a new relationship with self.

Students’ relationship with power was also examined in student journal entries. Boldly choosing critical awareness over ignorance, students revealed unprecedented agency, commitment, and a call to action for change. They began exhibiting abilities to see themselves and others reclaiming their wholeness to uplift others and work in solidarity towards the issues that confront humankind. Students shared:

“I learned to reclaim the ‘fabricated’ aspects of myself and transform them into a source of energy and creativity to uplift others.”

“I trust myself... I am ready, I am ready to step-up...I must not forget this as a feminist and continue to work together with other feminists for a change.”

Journal entries revealed that class activities embodied co-designing, co-empowering, and engaging students in meaning making. Students expressed their newfound agency through the frequent use of the word *redefine*. The term captured the reference to new facets of a student’s identity, as well as redefining social movements, phenomena, and constructs. Student journal entries reflected resistance, dissent, and authorized them as agents in the creation of their own meaning, reclaiming their power.

Students’ writing revealed their experience with unlearning and relearning power, and an evolving relationship with purposeful leadership through personalized experiences. Students were active agents in breaking through the limiting beliefs inducing powerlessness, including the gendering of leadership. The reflective practice of journaling revealed students’ reconceptualization of leadership, imbued with love, hope, and belonging. They questioned themselves regarding how they wanted to show up and of the ensuing consequence; at the same time, they determined to act in their current location. Students described a new sense of agency and a commitment to own one’s role in being a change agent in the world.

Journaling, a reflective teaching activity, is an approach for engaged learning that allows students to find one’s voice, reexamine one’s identity, and create a deeper understanding of self, identity, and agency.

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