

Radical Education and Social Change:
An Experiment in Student-Driven Democratic
Feminist Education

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June, 2006

*Not only is another world possible, she is on her way.
On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.
-Arundhati Roy*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is not just my own. Without my extraordinary community of family, friends, activists, educators and students, this work would not be as rich or varied. It is with a deep sense of humility and gratitude to my community that I finish this piece. Thank you for your continued support and love.

Dr. Anu Taranath, thank you for showing me classrooms can be different. Without knowing it, you have ultimately been the inspiration for this project. Tamara Myers, thank you for being there for me every step of the way. You never stepped on my toes or led me, but walked next to me, offered consistent encouragement and support... and answered my frantic emails at all hours of the night. Steve Araujo, thank you for living in the library with me, even on sunny days. Oh yes, and thank you for living the revolution.

Dr. Angela Ginorio, thank you for supporting me from the start and sharing your remarkable wisdom as a long-term feminist educator and researcher.

Dr. David Allen, thank you for guiding me through the never-ending bureaucratic process and for constantly validating the importance of this work, even when I doubted it myself.

Lisa Chekerylla, Marc Maupoux and all of our “Radical Education” classmates, thank you for your incredible imagination, dedication and willingness to do things differently. Without you, this project might still be a distant dream.

My writing has been significantly shaped by the work and activism of countless people. bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Minnie Bruce Pratt come to mind but there are too many to name here. I am in constant awe of their work and passionate dedication to working for social and economic justice.

Special thanks to everyone who did extensive editing of my work: Tamara Myers, Dr. Angela Ginorio, Dr. David Allen, Megan Wilbert, Steve Araujo, Aileen Duldulao, Chris Barrans, and Sidney Lewis.

Thank you to my family, my friends, my “Sinny.”

*And thank you, mama, for being my best teacher of all.
I dedicate this work to you.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Samantha Hatzenbeler is a recent graduate of the University of Washington Women Studies program, where she has focused on the intersections between racism, imperialism and sexism, as well as liberatory education.

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Sam lives in Seattle with her best friend, Sidney, and calls her mom every day.

INTRODUCTION

The longer I stay in school, the more disillusioned I become. My journey from first grade to my fourth year in a public university has been one of gratitude, fascination and adoration. Simultaneously, I feel rage, distrust and disappointment. In short, my relationship with the last sixteen years of public education can be described with two words: love and hate. As I reflect on my experience in classrooms, I realize that my years in public education, mostly spent with teachers who subscribe to conservative educational models, have been a battle to maintain my creativity and love of learning.

Past Experiences

Last year, in comparing two vastly different classes, I came to realize just how heavily connected my learning is to the actual physical space in which it is taking place. The classroom climate can be exhausting and fraught with frustration (the oppressive, passion-destroying kind), or it can be invigorating, engaging, and empowering. When I had a taste of the latter, I became enraged at what has been lacking in my education. I realized that, for the most part, my educational experiences have not been liberatory in the sense that I have not actively participated in the construction of curriculum, programs, or schools. Reflecting on my experiences in these two vastly different classes sparked both my research about democratic education and broader self-reflection about my educational experiences.

These two classes were in direct succession of one another in 2005, during my third year of college. The first one, in the field of Chicana Studies, closely resembled every other class I have taken at the University of Washington in terms of the teaching methods. I walked in the first day, full of hope, energy, and passion for the topic, as well as eagerness to meet the other students in the class. I was excited for a chance to develop my consciousness, and to create a

nurturing learning community with my peers. However, my hope quickly dwindled when I realized that the teacher and I were, to say the least, not on the same page. Even though the class was small enough to begin with introductions, the teacher, in a very monotone voice, began her lecture. Every day I hoped we would do something different. Instead, the level of the class remained simplistic throughout its entirety and focused only on the teacher's ideas. In addition, the teaching style continued in a top-down manner, where students were "empty receptacles" of knowledge (Freire). Students were not encouraged to ask questions or engage with the material. The teacher was even hostile to students who would interrupt her lectures with a question.

By the middle of the quarter, half of the class had stopped coming, and the people that did attend either slept through the classes or often stared blankly out the window. The teacher may have noticed, but continued on with her lectures. I gradually stopped caring, as each attempt to create connections with my peers in the class and critically analyze our texts were met with hostility and annoyance by the professor. As a last resort, even though I felt intimidated by her and very discouraged from going to her office hours, I made an appointment with her to talk about the class. In our meeting, I asked for small group discussion time because I wanted at least some time to discuss our reading assignments. She agreed to give us time once a week; we were only allowed to discuss questions she gave us however, which many of us felt were superficial and forced. In other words, this attempt during the last weeks of the quarter was too little, too late. I eventually gave up and left the class at the end of the quarter feeling that I had been cheated out of an otherwise potentially life-changing learning experience. We did not even have the opportunity to fill out post-class feedback forms.

Sadly, this class was a typical one for me and did not differ from the majority of my classroom experiences. I frequently feel powerless in my classes. I do not feel empowered to

change any aspect of the way a class is taught or what we study. The most I can do is try to find teachers that genuinely care about student input and try to be aware of the power they hold as faculty, but these teachers are extremely rare. Otherwise, I often wait to give feedback until after a class ends when I no longer fear for my grade or well-being in the class. When I manage to find a class that is not based in the lecture format—where students only take notes and regurgitate information on tests—I am relieved. However, in seminar classes, the teacher is still the focal point of the room and students speak to the teacher only. Instead of feeling a sense of community where we all mutually strive to teach and learn from one another, I feel encouraged to compete with others for the teacher’s limited attention and praise. Even though we outnumber the professor and could work together to change things we do not like, we have internalized the popular idea that teachers are “experts” and students are not and we take no action for fear of receiving a poor grade. The style and pace of learning are forced upon us, regardless of diverse learning styles and paces of individual students. So many times, teachers do not assess student feelings or acknowledge the ever-shifting dynamic of the classroom; they simply continue on with rigid plans, even when opportunities for deeper learning present themselves. There is a sense in most classes that to deviate from the strict agenda and course outline is a waste of time. In my experience in classes at the University of Washington, many teachers do not ever change the way they teach their courses, either from year to year or between quarters; they certainly do not change their classes from day to day or during class sessions themselves. This rigidity ignores differing student abilities, personalities or interests and does not allow for engaged or empowered learning.

I entered a classroom that radically differed from these other experiences the very next quarter after the class in Chicana Studies, which subsequently changed my life and the way I

view education. In this class on African feminisms, we began with a group discussion where I immediately heard the voices of my peers and had the chance to speak my own views. I felt not only acknowledged as a person, but also respected. Our chairs were arranged in a large circle where we could all look at one another, instead of only speaking to the professor. I was not accustomed to this multi-directional form of teaching, rather than the top-down method the majority of my other teachers used. There was tremendous responsibility placed on the shoulders of each member of the class to help others learn and engage with our material. We not only worked deeply with literature and theory, we also produced knowledge collectively.

Unfortunately, the instructor of this course had a family emergency halfway through and could not continue, but I did not need more than five weeks with her to know that this was a radically different way of approaching education. In fact, as I am still realizing, this class changed the way I view methods of learning forever. Above all, this class gave me hope. Coming to the realization that education does not have to follow conservative models of education, but can instead be a tool for liberation and empowerment, was a moment of intense relief and hope.

In discussing these two classrooms, it is not my intention to set up a dichotomy of bad versus good teacher, but to make a point about the larger university system which creates teachers who are either unable or unwilling to give more attention to their pedagogical methods. My critique of education is about the system; it is not my intention to blame individual teachers for their non-democratic teaching methods. Teachers are not supported or rewarded (individually or institutionally) to work against the grain of authoritative systems of education. Instead, they are encouraged to continue to play the role of dominating and disrespecting students. Many of us, students and teachers alike, are raised with conservative educational models and fulfill our roles within them because we are taught to expect them from each other. As feminist educator

and theorist, bell hooks, says, “there is a serious ‘crisis in education’ where teachers don’t want to teach and students don’t want to learn” (12).¹ Teachers are not taught how to teach in ways that do not reflect top-down pedagogies, much less rewarded by the university system for doing so in ways that empowers and energizes students. At the UW, for example, the majority of focus is on producing research, not on teaching. When professors are trying to gain tenure, they are primarily pushed to write books and articles, and as long as they do not receive horrendous teaching evaluations, they can be rewarded in the institution. There is not much space or support for giving attention to pedagogy and the majority of classes are too large to be conducive to developing community.

Project

Disappointed with many of my experiences in mainstream public schools, I wanted to attempt to develop a democratic, anti-authoritarian, feminist learning space collectively with other students. I wanted to see what it could be like to experience a democratic classroom actively dedicated to breaking down hierarchies, not only within school, but also outside of academia. This is what brought me to the idea of developing a class with other students. I felt I needed a space without professors or instructors present in order to explore issues of top-down and authoritative teaching methods. I was feeling sick and tired of classrooms being dominated by faculty with unrecognized privilege in the university instead of getting to hear more from my own peers.

It is important to articulate here that I am not equating all students in terms of their institutional privilege. I am not saying that all students have equal amounts of power within the university, or in the larger national system. I am saying that all students have the shared

¹ As a note for the reader that is not familiar with her work, bell hooks does not capitalize her name and I respect her choice in my work.

experience of being relatively powerless within classrooms where teachers do not make attempts to employ democratic teaching methods. Students in the university lack privilege in the system because they are not faculty or administrators; however, all students also have complex relationships to societal power structures and have varying degrees of privilege, based on markers of race, class, gender, ability and others. These complex systems of oppression and privilege have real consequences for students in classrooms. The classroom:

is fraught with gender, race, class, and caste issues: the patriarchal habit of men who interrupt women at will, the reluctance of students of color to speak up in a white-dominant setting, the discomfort of working-class students of all colors and of foreign students with having to speak in the standard English and academic discourse of the classroom, and the student-to-student competitiveness for grades. (Shor 69)

Even without a teacher present, we still had to be aware of these power dynamics in order to create a liberatory environment.

Rooted in consciousness of these issues, I decided I wanted to learn how we as students can collectively create democratic and student-focused learning spaces without perpetuating these systems of domination and patterns of oppression. With much support from my community of students, educators and social change activists (both within and outside of academia), and from a planning group of equally frustrated and passionate students, we began to develop our own class. Together we had the goal of building a democratic, feminist, anti-authoritarian learning space. What we hoped to create was ambitious, to say the least. Titled “Radical Education and Social Change,” the course was from a student perspective (a rare attempt in most mainstream universities,) and took place in winter quarter, 2006. The course was further developed by the participants themselves as the quarter progressed. Aside from learning the theory and literature behind radical pedagogies, our course was an experiment to collectively discover how to practice education as liberation. As Myles Horton says, “it’s impossible to

organize without educating and *being* educated by the very process of organizing” (Bell 121). Working together to create change is a tool of learning all by itself.

From the beginning, I have seen this project as healing from past mis-education and as hope for something better. It is rooted in my struggles around issues of democratic education, authoritative systems, and systemic oppression. This project is my attempt to begin where I am at as an undergraduate student at a large mainstream university in which I perceive a great need for attention to pedagogy and respect for student voices. As bell hooks says, “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy,” (hooks 12). The university is a site of radical potential and it is precisely *because* I have hope for change that I engage in this conversation about democracy in the academy at all. Additionally, schools are an enormous part of our social system and we cannot abandon them in our struggle for justice.

Project History

When I first conceived of the idea for a student-led class about radical education, I spoke with advisors in Women Studies, (my area of focus), to help me create a space for the course. However, because there was no previous design for student-led courses in our department, it proved a long and tedious process trying to create one. I was met with many questions, confusion, and a mess of bureaucracy. I think the difficulties I faced are more reflective of the location of Women Studies, institutionally, than of the values or priorities of the actual faculty guiding me. Women Studies is a department and not a program, so they have less room for alternative type projects. Additionally, because Women Studies (and other departments which focus on issues of oppression and power, such as American Ethnic Studies, Disability Studies and Queer Studies) are often attacked by those in the institution for not being rigorous enough, they often find projects like mine too “risky.” My idea ended up getting lost in a paper trail. This

provoked thought about the ironies of developing a project of this nature within the very institution I was trying to critique. I ended up implementing the class through another university program, Comparative History of Ideas, which already had a built-in structure for this type of project. Significantly, CHID was the only program that I could find that encouraged student-led classes. I am grateful to this program for valuing student-led educational opportunities, which I believe provide options to students who are looking for alternative methods of exploring topics of interest.

In discussing the project history, I must recognize that “Radical Education” was not the first to be led by students on campus. There is a long history of student-led projects (both for credit and not for credit,) on the University of Washington campus. It is important to acknowledge that history here because this project has greatly benefited from it. Additionally, the class was not the first to focus on issues of radical and feminist education traditions. Although I have only heard about two courses during my time in school, I have faith that these were not the first or only courses in these fields at the university. There is no system or community set up for students and faculty interested in these issues so it is challenging to locate colleagues with similar passions. The two classes I *do* know about have helped to create space and precedent for our own. They have also offered invaluable information on structure and content ideas. The first one was the planning course for Women 299: “Women Studies Colloquium,” a course for new majors created by Women Studies students themselves. The second class, “Critical Pedagogies of Race, Class and Gender,” was developed collectively by instructors from various departments about radical pedagogies. Our project has benefited immensely from studying these previous classes, as well as from talking to those involved in creating them. In addition to these classes, I learned a great deal from a focus group on anarchist

theory in which I participated during fall quarter, 2005. This course gave me experience in trying to develop a class collectively and democratically with other students and has been invaluable to me. I am very grateful to all of my predecessors here on the University of Washington campus who have dedicated much time and energy to democratic and feminist learning spaces. Many of these people have been incredibly generous with their guidance and resource-sharing for my own class, and I am deeply indebted to them.

From the beginning of my project, I knew I wanted it to be collectively led by students. I did a lot of background reading on the topic, with much help from my advisor, Tamara Myers, and eventually found two other undergraduate students, Lisa Chekerylla and Marc Maupoux, with similar interests in democratic education. Lisa identifies as a middle class, mixed Latina, able-bodied queer woman and Marc identifies as a straight upper-middle class French-American white boy. Marc shared with me in his own words why he wanted to be part of the group.

For me, the project fit in with exploring liberatory, democratic ways people can interact and work together in every facet of life. I am always interested in settings based on sharing skills and knowledge, being able to bring our whole selves to every situation, coming together to build on ideas collectively and imagine alternatives to hierarchy, competition, compartmentalized lives, detachment from each other and the world around us.

The three of us met weekly during fall quarter, 2005 to discuss our ideas, questions, and experiences in order to develop the class.

Systemic Connections

My passion for liberatory education and challenging hierarchies in schools is rooted in my feminist values and strong investment in breaking down all systems of domination. Hierarchies in mainstream U.S. classrooms are reflective of greater systems of domination in the United States, both presently and historically. We live in a society with growing global capitalism, privatization, and ever-present racist and patriarchal violence. Indigenous peoples

and peoples of color continue to be colonized and exploited by whites and first world peoples. Increasing religious fundamentalism, often based in racist and sexist ideology is a danger to us all. Currently 10% of the United States controls 80% of the wealth (Virgo 47). This proves that we do not live in a meritocratic society where individuals can ‘pull themselves up by their bootstraps,’ but instead, we live within a system that relies upon the availability of a vulnerable, exploited underclass. Additionally, the United States is undergoing profound social cutbacks, militarization and an ever-growing prison industrial complex, in which people of color and poor people are disproportionately represented. “Five million of us are homeless, 37 million of us have no health insurance, 30 million of us are illiterate, one million of us are in prison, 20 percent of us live in poverty” (Virgo 58). In the U.S, where sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, imperialism, xenophobia, racism and white supremacy are alive and well, it is critical, now as ever, to examine our institutions and radically alter them to envision a more just society.

Schools are viewed as places where students can enrich our minds and think freely, before we will enter the “real” world. We often think about schools as free from these constraints of “regular” society. On the contrary, however, I believe that schools are neither free from societal restrictions nor separate from social reproduction. As radical educator Ira Shor explains, “Power in society is like power in schools, colleges, and classrooms—unilateral, unelected, top-down, hierarchical, patriarchal and not democratic” (23). Public education serves to reaffirm the status quo, and acts to reproduce dominant hegemonic societal structures and ideologies.

These issues of privilege and oppression play out in concrete ways within academia. When critically analyzing our institutions, it is important to ask, who is represented? The student body at the University of Washington is grossly imbalanced, with students of color poorly represented. For example, the year I entered college, there were only 297 Native students and

733 black students in the entire student body, compared to over 15,000 white students. These numbers are not representative of larger Washington state populations.² Even more importantly, men and white people are extremely overrepresented in positions of power, such as those of professorship and administration. For example, 68% of faculty are men which leaves only 32% women. Eighty-five percent are white while 15% are racial minorities. Of the women faculty, only 18% are women of color (University of Washington [A]). These are not reflective of overall Washington state populations. The University of Washington is not an anomaly, but reflects national inequalities in academia as well.³ As we can see here, academic institutions are entrenched in larger systemic inequalities and serve to maintain the status quo. The lack of equal representation in terms of gender, race and class is based in larger systemic inequalities. This blatant inequity in education is nothing short of a moral outrage.

In schools, citizens are prepared for the type of government we have in the US; we socialize students not to be active, empowered citizens in a direct democracy, with direct control over decisions which affect their lives, but to maintain capitalism and authoritative systems of government. This reproduction is apparent when examining the hierarchies which expose themselves in the classroom. I see specific ways in which I have been molded into a passive citizen, appropriate for an authoritarian capitalist system which requires its citizens to lack critical thinking skills, and to be passive, deferent, and obedient. When examining the ways this plays out on a daily basis in my classrooms, I feel enraged, disappointed and helpless. The fact that teachers often enter the classroom on day one with a syllabus in hand, ready to simply tell

² While Natives and blacks make up 1.6% and 3.2% respectively of the Washington state population, Native students only make up 1.05% the UW student body while blacks make up only 2.6% of the UW student body. These numbers may seem insignificant, but they translate into hundreds and hundreds of students not receiving a university education (University of Washington and U.S. Census Bureau).

³ “There has been no change since 1977 in the percent of women professors that have tenure, and full professors across all schools and disciplines are 79 percent male, and almost 90 percent white... in terms of faculty of color, the percentage of black faculty has remained the same in the last thirty years—less than 5 percent” (Mohanty 179).

students the rules, assignments, structures and grading policies, is reflective of a larger authoritarian system. In classrooms, we are trained to sit in silence, ask permission to speak by raising our hands and quietly accept rules given to us. Resistance from these norms is highly discouraged. If a student *does* take the risk of being directly rejected or disrespected by asking for something different from what the teacher has created, the chance of change relies on the benevolence of only one person. This mirrors authoritarian government in which citizens are trained to remain silent about injustice and have to appeal to a small group of privileged people to try to make change. In this kind of environment, both in society and in education, it is exhausting to feel constantly disappointed, disempowered and to feel there is no recourse or option for change. After a while, it is easy to give up and simply accept the rules as they are given. There is an inherent contradiction here between the supposed “democracy” that the U.S. claims rhetorically, and the way the system is set up, which precludes engaged citizenship.

I have a very specific relationship to the power dynamics that often play out in classrooms as a white, middle class, able-bodied queer woman that was born and raised in the United States. While I am a part of a few underprivileged groups, I also have access to a lot of privilege. Navigating the classroom and institutional hierarchies as a student during my time at the University of Washington has opened my eyes to the ways in which larger systems of oppression and privilege function. I cannot even begin to count the times I have been discounted as a woman in my classes, with perhaps my Women Studies classes being the exception to the rule. In gender mixed classrooms, it is almost always male students who speak first, speak often and interrupt women as they please, with no reprimand from the instructor or invitation to consider their actions. Similarly, in mixed-race settings, it is white students that feel entitled to act in these dominating ways. My experience in my classes as a white person is one of privilege.

I see white people in my textbooks, read about the history of whites in the U.S. and see white people in the majority of administrative and faculty positions at my school.

In light of these injustices at institutional levels, we must be hungry for justice. We must check our apathy and misguided assumption that ‘oppression has always existed and will always exist.’ These ideas serve to maintain the violent status quo and thwart our attempts at solidarity. We must build resistance on all sides at all times. It is important, now as ever to continue our work against oppression. We must work towards an intersectional analysis of the ways all systems of oppression function to keep the majority down so a minority can benefit. I believe democratic and feminist education is one strategy in the constantly growing and changing resistance movements of oppressed peoples to build non-hierarchical communities where power-sharing and collective work is valued. I believe truly anti-authoritarian education has the potential to be a catalyst for social change. When students are empowered and have the opportunity to develop critical consciousness, we prepare them to challenge the status quo. We can nurture citizens that learn to actively question their surroundings, instead of raising people to be passive, deferent and obedient, mere cogs in the wheel of a white supremacist, capitalist patriarchal system (hooks, Giroux). Done in the right way, education can be a tool for liberation. I see education not only as a means to an end, but as an end itself; the process is key. The struggle to build anti-authoritarian classrooms is connected to democratically organizing for social justice. Building anti-authoritarian, feminist, democratic classrooms is not just about creating schools to look differently. It is about envisioning and building the kind of society we want for ourselves and for those in the future.

Just imagine if schools were run democratically; students would participate in policy-making in the classroom, departmental, and institutional levels, thus becoming socialized as active, critical citizens who took the initiative in framing

their own purposes, who didn't wait for authorities and the media to tell them what to think about and what things mean. (Shor 24)

Practicing democratic and feminist values in classrooms facilitates alternative social production, where students are socialized to think critically and work together, instead of passively accepting their allotment in a competitive, top-down and rigid environment. In calling for re-visioning of schools, I am not arguing that this is sufficient to dramatically alter unjust societal power structures. However, I do believe that creating anti-oppressive education systems is a crucial element of working toward change.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the process and content of our class, including the challenges and lessons we learned along the way, in order to help those in the future that wish to work toward democratic education. While I wish to speak to those both within and outside of academia, due to the restrictions of time and resources for this manuscript, I have had to narrow my writing focus to those within academia, to teachers and students interested in the ins and outs of democratic education.⁴ In my paper, I will explore the challenges and lessons we had as a class, as well as those I experienced individually, in trying to create an anti-authoritarian learning space. It is my goal to make this piece democratically accessible, in addition to simply being a written artifact of the process of the class. My intent in creating this piece is to add a missing link in the conversation around democratic education: student voices. My work in this piece is not meant to be exhaustive, but to add another student voice to the conversation of liberatory pedagogy. With this piece, I hope to inspire other students to engage in this conversation, reflect on their own experiences, and take action.

⁴ Additionally, I have narrowed my writing focus to the arts and humanities. While there is literature on the implications of critical pedagogy and popular education for the sciences, I do not delve into those issues here.

I have always thought that what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership in others.
-Ella J. Baker

TERMINOLOGY

As with any specialized field of knowledge, there are very specific terms used in the wide-ranging fields of feminist studies, radical education and social science research. By foregrounding this paper with an explanation of my terminology, it is my intent to help break down language barriers between people in different locations. This intention is also based in honoring the democratic feminist tradition in which I am writing. As feminist popular educator Shirley Walters discusses, “The distance and tension between feminist theory and practice have been exacerbated in some ways as some forms of feminist scholarship have grown and become more institutionalized, developing increasingly esoteric and exclusive languages” (Walters 11). In my attempts to be clear about my own meanings of the words I use in this paper, I hope to interrupt this process of perpetuating inaccessibility of “esoteric and exclusive” language often present in academic papers. Instead, my goal is to facilitate dialogue between those in various fields, as well as between academicians and those outside academia.

The definitions I am offering are not meant to be comprehensive, due to the extreme variation in each, but rather should serve as a tool to help the reader grasp my intentions and location within the material I am exploring. I am drawing on literature from many different fields and therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge that each group of people uses these terms in very different ways. In writing these definitions, I am attempting to make my own location in the text as clear as possible.

I will begin with an explanation of the word *education*, as it is central to my project. I do not use this word to refer only to the academy, but much more broadly to refer to any process which involves the practices of learning and teaching. *Education* happens at every moment, in and out of classrooms, whether we are conscious of it or not. We learn at home, on the street,

from the media, and, as my paper will explore, in groups working together to produce democratic spaces.

In my use of the term *radical education*, I mean to include pedagogies and styles of teaching that share the goals of developing critical consciousness in participants and challenging the status quo through the means of questioning traditional forms of educating. This includes such education forms as ‘*emancipatory*,’ *liberatory*,’ *feminist*,’ and ‘*critical*’. There are many ways to talk about liberatory education. Throughout my piece, I will be using *radical* and *liberatory* interchangeably, while also recognizing the nuanced ways that varying authors use these terms.

There are many variations of *feminism*. As I move forward with my degree in Women Studies, my understanding of this field becomes more expansive; the number of definitions I have found have increased exponentially. Many feminists are concerned with breaking down all social hierarchies, such as those based on gender, race, class, ability and sexuality. Many others critique systems of imperialism and colonization, capitalism, white supremacy, and authoritative government. The lowest common denominator among all feminists, however, is the goal of dismantling patriarchy, a word used to mean the systematic domination of men over all people who are not men.⁵ It is important here to recognize that all men do not have equal amounts of access to institutional privilege. For example, a poor man of color can access male privilege, but does not have class or racial privileges. The complex and interlocking systems of power are at play here, which I discuss in more detail below.

I use the word *power* to mean the ability to access and use resources and authority. I use this word in relation to institutional and interlocking systems of oppression, domination and

⁵ I say ‘people who are not men’ to interrupt the fallacy that there are only two genders, rather than a diverse spectrum. Binary discourse of gender excludes the millions of transgendered individuals and others who do not fit into this narrow description of gender identity.

hierarchy. These shape the ways that power functions in the world, which result in economic, social, political, emotional, and spiritual consequences for people.

To give a more detailed analysis of the way power functions in the United States, I draw on work that most closely resembles my ideas about the way *power* works by feminist theorist, bell hooks. It is necessary to include and build upon a term she uses in her work to describe the United States of America, “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 1994.) She speaks of the intersections between white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy, and how they function together to maintain dominance over people who are not rich, white, owning class men.

I will offer definitions of these three terms in order to be clear about my usage of them. For my definition of white supremacy, I draw upon the definition that prison activist, Elizabeth Martínez, gives:

White supremacy is an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege. (Martínez 1998)

White supremacy intersects with capitalism because of the origins and maintenance of an underclass which is predominantly poor people and people of color, both in the US and globally. Capitalism is “an economic or socio-economic system in which the means of production are predominantly privately owned and operated for profit” (Wikipedia 2006.) The capitalist system we have in the US relies on a large underclass of laborers, largely poor people, people of color and women, in order to maintain the status quo, which also serves to keep those with institutional privilege in power. Patriarchy is connected to capitalism because the latter could not exist without the underpaid and unrecognized labor done by women, both in the private and public sectors. This is also evidenced by the feminization of poverty, where women hold much less property, resources and capital in general. Patriarchy is the “sociological condition where male

members of a society tend to predominate in positions of power; the more powerful the position, the more likely it is that a male will hold that position” (Wikipedia 2006). Put simply, patriarchy is “institutionalized sexism” (hooks 15), which is reflected in every phase and facet of U.S. American⁶ society.

Complement to the phrase ‘white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,’ I include an analysis of the norm of heterosexuality, or heteronormativity. To put it more simply, this analysis of heteronormativity gives a critique of the accepted and institutionalized societal norm of heterosexuality. Therefore, I use the phrase, “white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy,” to explain my analysis of power in the United States. Some groups, such as white people, men, those in the ruling class, and heterosexuals have access to institutional privilege in the system while others, such as women, immigrants, people of color, poor people and queer people, do not.

For the purpose of this paper, I am using the word *democracy* to signify a system where the participants have direct control over the processes and decisions that will affect them. There is a significant difference between *representative democracy*, where leaders are elected by the majority, and *direct democracy*, where all citizens hold power. The U.S. does not have a system based in *direct democracy* in which all participants are actively consenting to being a part of the group, have control over decisions that affect them, and have access to resources to make this possible. It is important to draw this distinction for my project because of our experiment of forming a democratic classroom. As anti-racist organizer, scott winn⁷, says, “U.S. style ‘democracy [is] judged by a ‘free’ market and some symbolic voting ritual that structurally limits

⁶ I use the term “U.S. America” throughout my paper to interrupt the misconception that the United States is the only part of America, which ignores the many other countries on the American continents.

⁷ As a note for the reader that is not familiar with his work, scott winn does not capitalize his name and I respect his choice in my work.

participatory decision-making” (7). Participatory decision-making and active consent are key parts of *direct democracy*.

Lastly, I use *liberation* in this paper to mean freedom from oppressive hierarchies, including, but not limited to, sexism, racism, classism, and ableism. Additionally, I use *liberation* to mean freedom from violence, exploitation, domination, and unfair treatment.

These definitions are meant to give a starting point for the reader to understand my usage of these words. Because I cannot give explanations for each contestable term that I will be using in my paper, the reader can look to the Introduction and Literature Review for a more thorough explanation of my terminology.

Our solidarity must be affirmed by shared belief in a spirit of intellectual openness that celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in collective dedication to truth.
-bell hooks

QUESTIONS

I developed a series of questions which I hoped to answer throughout the course of this project. Many of these questions came directly out of the planning sessions with Marc and Lisa, while developing the course. Some we formed collectively and some are my own. These questions include ideas related to course development and structure, course process, authority and hierarchy, class environment, results and the overarching questions of the project. Additionally, I will use these questions later in my Conclusion to reflect on our process.

Development and Structure

As we begin developing our class, we have many questions about how to go about this while still keeping our goals in mind. These questions involve ideas about structure, physical space, student projects, workload, and readings.

How can we, as the three facilitators, approach the project without assuming we know the future members and their interests, and what goals we will articulate collectively? In terms of deciding on a structure for the class beforehand, how much will we want as a class? How can structure help or hinder the learning process? For example, how much should we, the facilitators, impose our own values and goals for the class?

In our pre-class development, we are striving to de-center those with privilege. How can we do this, even while some of us have access to these privileges? For example, how can we use our classroom to de-center whiteness as the norm, when many of us are white and we are at a predominantly white institution? What can we do to de-center maleness? How can we be sure to include readings from varying backgrounds (not just those with class/race/male privilege) when we, the facilitators, do not have control over what will we be reading and studying? For example,

how can we be sure to include Native voices as well as people who do not consider themselves “academics”?

In thinking about the classroom itself, how can this space look physically different? For example, how will we arrange the chairs? Will we sit in a circle? How can we claim the classroom as our own? Will we display art or work we develop in class? To what degree will this influence our sense of community?

In terms of the final portion of our class, how will we choose to evaluate ourselves? If we choose to remove a grading system where one person has the power to numerically evaluate each person’s learning, what will take its place to motivate the group to learn and do work together?

Process

Recognizing that the first day is one of the most important, how will we choose to begin the class and set the tone for the rest of the quarter? How will we start to shift from traditional methods and articulate to the class that we want to develop democratic decision making? What barriers to developing and maintaining this will we face throughout the quarter?

What will our challenges be in trying to make space for community and keep a focus on collective processing? Are there ways we can build in time and space for group processing, feedback, and planning? Recognizing that active consent is an essential part of a democratic classroom, how can we remain committed to developing a consensual classroom?

Authority and Hierarchy

I expect participants will look to Marc, Lisa and I for direction, facilitation and answers. How can we shift the focus from ourselves as primary leaders and facilitators to the rest of the group, so we may all hold responsibility for the class collectively? Pushing this idea of removing hierarchy further, does anti-authoritarianism imply no leadership? How will we keep our

sessions from settling into stagnancy? Will it work to facilitate collectively or will we need one facilitator? Is having a facilitator necessarily hierarchical or just one more role for students to fill?

Lisa, Marc and I have chosen to not develop a list of readings to impose. We feel this would restrict the class from taking its own course. Instead, we wish to develop the class along the way with other participants, based on everyone's interests, and therefore, maintain an organic, flexible process. How can we do this when the three of us will clearly have knowledge, background and experience that other participants will not have? How can we offer our resources without dominating the group dynamic? How can we make space for other participants to share their knowledge and resources as well? At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that although the three of us want to create a democratic space, we still have more power over the class because we are necessarily more invested, have been studying the topic for awhile, and have developed a tightly-knit working group. How can we keep dialogue open about this, among the three of us and within the class?

Something the three of us addressed in our planning meetings was that one way teachers and students often try to gain authority over others is by using specific language of which not everyone in the class shares the same understanding. For example, teachers sometimes use words and terms which are very specific to a certain field, and therefore can lead to more confusion than comprehension. How can we shift the focus from a competitive atmosphere where students and teachers try to one-up one another to be the "smartest" in the room to one that strives for mutual understanding and teaching of one another? What are tools to help us accomplish this?

Class environment

What is a safe classroom? How does the conception of “safety” change, based on a student’s identities? Does safety mean that all students have space to speak? Does it mean that issues of racism and sexism (for example) are not skirted around? Or is safety really more about developing a nurturing community where conflict is accepted as a tool of learning and growth?

Based off of our reading of bell hooks, we recognize that creating a space where students can express their emotions, personal experiences and essentially, be “whole human beings with complex lives and experiences, rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge” is essential to creating an engaged classroom (hooks 15.) How can we nurture an emotional learning environment, especially where students may have never had experience with this kind of classroom before? How can we “emphasize well-being?” (hooks 15.) Along with well-being are trust, a sense of community, and a sense of openness to students’ creative expression. How will we help to develop these in the classroom?

In thinking about the class environment, it seems important to try to anticipate what students’ fears might be. Where will we meet resistance? How can we push against this and encourage students to ask questions, while at the same time, making space for a culture of dissent where students maintain their spirits of resistance?

Because I am hoping for this class to be a space where we do not skirt around issues of oppression and violence, how will we navigate the terrain of talking about these things, while at the same time, maintaining a space where these things are explored, not only intellectually, but also in terms of our lived experiences and identities. For example, because all participants will be members of social groups with varying levels of privilege and oppression, (ie, white women, women of color, sexual minorities, etc.), each participant will have some form of internalized

dominance or internalized oppression.⁸ Just as in each moment of interacting with others cross-culturally, this means that the dynamic will be affected, based on people's relationships to power and how they may have been socialized. As is usual, students with more privilege tend to speak more. How can we equalize levels of participation? I acknowledge that participation is much broader than simply who speaks and who doesn't, but this is one aspect of the classroom dynamic that is important to observe. I want to make sure there is space to acknowledge our group dynamic.

Results

What will students take from this class? It is important to look at the skills, ideas and questions this class will help form. What knowledge will we produce as a class? How will our experience in the class affect the ways we view academia and social justice activism outside academia? How will our definitions of power, expertise, authority, and even education be challenged? Furthermore, how will we know we have been successful when the class comes to a close? I anticipate that this will spark questions of what "success" is in the university and how we would like to define it for ourselves.

Overall Goals

There are some overarching questions that drive this project which reflect our overall values and goals. I want to know—what does it feel like to practice education as liberation? What does it look like to create a democratic, anti-authoritarian and feminist learning space? In thinking about the development of this class, as well as social justice organizing (within and

⁸ I use the terms "internalized oppression" and "internalized superiority" to mean the "accepting and acting out the definition of self." For example, internalized racial oppression is given to people of color by their oppressor and is "rooted in a race construct that had designated your race as the inferior race, or one of many inferior races." Conversely, internalized racial superiority is the "definition of self... rooted in a race construct that designated your race as the superior race." Both are multi-generational processes which are manifested in many ways, either in disempowerment or empowerment, depending on whether the person is white or of color (People's Institute for Survival and Beyond 2006).

outside of academic institutions), I wonder, how can a group of people work to interrupt the pattern of reproducing dominant hierarchies in the classroom? I am especially curious how this works if some or all of the people are members of the dominant groups in this society. Can these methods of prioritizing student voices actually have the reverse effects than what we intend and reproduce dominant hierarchies? How do these educational methods play out when they are used in an institution that is primarily white?

As group facilitators specifically, I want to know how we can work toward building the class from an anti-oppression framework. What can we do to interrupt the perpetuation of systems of domination and hierarchy such as racism, classism or sexism?

Pushing more deeply, I am thinking about the irony of attempting to produce a project that critiques and opposes the very system of which it is a part. Can we be successful, even though the rest of our education, in both the past and present, reflects traditional teaching practices? What does it mean to try to practice liberatory education within an institution that perpetuates systematic domination and upholds authoritarianism? In thinking about knowledge and learning more broadly, does having information that others do not have always imply a hierarchy? Is hierarchy always bad? How can knowledge be transferred without imposing domination?

What kinds of constructive feedback will we offer to our allies in the institution about collectively creating democratic and student-focused learning spaces?

Paramount in this process for me are the questions I have about the implications this class, and radical education in general, have for our lives outside of academia. Although these questions are not answerable from our project, these questions are ultimately the direction I want to be looking. How can we transfer our learning to other classrooms where teachers do not agree

with the ways we want our education to happen and, even more challenging, spaces outside academia? How will we use what we learn in the groups we are a part of, that organize for social and economic justice? How do we connect our discussions with our overall life experiences?

Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.
-Paulo Freire

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of my literature review is to familiarize myself and the reader with the many voices speaking about liberatory education. In addition, these readings offered me background so I was better informed when helping to suggest useful pieces for our class.

I have reviewed literature in the areas of radical education, critical and feminist pedagogies, popular education traditions, including those which are specifically feminist as well as social justice educating manuals, the free school movement, anarchism, and Native studies of education. These are some key areas in the broad field of liberatory education, but my review of the literature is by no means exhaustive. I have sampled across a wide range of fields in order to learn how different groups speak of education, power and liberation. I will end my literature review with a brief discussion regarding the gaps I see and where my work fits into the conversation of liberatory education.

In starting my literature review with critical pedagogy, and not surprisingly, with voices mostly of white men, it is not my intent to center my discussion around these people and their ideas. In my literature review, I am following the path that I have taken in my exploration of the field of liberatory education. Therefore I use critical pedagogy as a jumping off point to survey the other areas of literature.

Critical Pedagogy

In the conversation of radical education, critical pedagogy is a phrase often used to talk about a style of educating that is dedicated to breaking down hierarchies in the classroom in order to empower students to develop critical consciousness. In discussing critical pedagogy and popular education, as well as their feminist variations in separate sections, it is not my intention to draw false distinctions between them, but to tease out the nuances of each field.

Critical pedagogy critiques traditional forms of education, including top-down and authoritarian ideologies. These authoritarian pedagogies have no stake in developing critical thinking skills in participants and do not value participant knowledge. In traditional education, there is only one “expert” and the rest of the students are thought of, as Brazilian educator Paulo Freire characterized, empty receptacles for the deposition of knowledge. This is referred to as the “banking model of education” and is antithetical to democratic education (Freire). Freire’s most recognized work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, has been very influential in my understanding about how education can be used as a tool of liberation. He is often considered a major player in the development of the critical pedagogy field. An important idea that Freire discusses in his work is the importance of developing all classroom participants as simultaneously teachers *and* students. Participants “become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (80) instead of placing all responsibility for classroom dynamics on the teacher. Also, this makes space for the idea that learning and teaching is a two-way process, rather than one that is unidirectional. Just as the teacher instructs the students, the teacher is taught by students.

A key term used in critical pedagogy is “praxis,” meaning the combination of, and relationship between, practice and theory. Freire discusses the importance of these two ideas being in constant conversation with each other, because this dialectical relationship allows for more social action grounded in anti-oppressive theory. This idea of praxis, where practice and theory are closely connected, has been very influential for the development of our class.

Many critical pedagogues speak of hidden curriculum, which Henry Giroux discusses in his book, Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope, as the unspoken teachings in mainstream classrooms by teachers who do not acknowledge their positionality or methodology. Teachers instruct their students, not only in the explicit material in their curriculum, but also in the

methods, systems and ideas which reflect societal ideas, even though this remains implicit. In this same vein, Giroux explains that schools reproduce social constructions.

Schools are “reproductive” in that they provide different classes and social groups with forms of knowledge, skills, and culture that not only legitimate the dominant culture, but also track students in a labor force differentiated by gender, racial and class considerations (119).

In other words, public schools are places that uphold and reproduce dominant ideology. Citizens are formed in classrooms and school systems, by reproducing and constructing people for particular roles. For example, students of color and students from working class backgrounds are placed in tracking systems that teach these groups their place in dominant society. Giroux’ ideas have been extremely significant in the development of my ideas around public schools as reproductive sites of systematic oppression.

Especially useful for me in the field of critical pedagogy is the work of Ira Shor. In his book, When Students Have Power, Shor gives an account of his attempts to create democratic classrooms within the university system as a professor and share authority with students. He shares some of his frustrations with public education.

As a routine feature of formal education, there are no democratic mechanisms for students to propose their own courses, themes, or syllabi. They have no institutional power to plan courses; curriculum is made for them by others, by teachers and academics who often love knowledge and have the best interests of the students in mind. Nevertheless, when people are not consulted about policy and process in their experience, they are denied citizen status as members of a democracy. (31)

Shor’s ideas about students’ lack of empowerment and power to create their own learning environments reflect my own ideas; reading his work has been validating and encouraging. His book has been especially invaluable to me because he discusses the day-to-day developments in implementing liberatory pedagogy. Key components include analyzing classroom dynamics in terms of power structures and student resistance, as well as his own methods for challenging

students to think critically about classroom space and processes. Shor gives an analysis of the “Siberian Syndrome” (18), which he describes as a reflection of student disempowerment—students automatically seat themselves in the back corners of the classroom as a reaction to unequal power dynamics. His methods for evening out the power relations were useful in the construction of our course, even though we did not have a teacher present as his classrooms did. For example, one way that Shor encourages students to claim their education is by frontloading, or prioritizing, student voices. In the beginning of classes, Shor begins by hearing from students about their experiences and opinions, instead of with his voice and a pre-organized list assignments and readings. He also continues this process by pushing for students to read their own written work in class, thereby asserting their voices in the conversation. This begins the process of infusing the classroom with democracy (40). Shor’s work has helped me, not only in the development of my ideas around power dynamics in the classroom, but also in terms of what he focuses on in his documentation and sense-making process.

Critiques of Freire and Critical Pedagogy

There is much work in the area of problematizing and complicating the fields of critical and feminist pedagogies. I found many, many critiques of Freire and this could be a complete thesis on its own. I have chosen to highlight a couple that I have found most relevant.

As part of my research to specifically locate work which questions Freire’s theories, I found Derek Rasmussen’s article, “Qallunology: A Pedagogy for the Oppressor.” In this piece, Rasmussen directly responds to Freire’s work by calling into question his very definition of education and the implications it has for indigenous populations. Rasmussen draws his critique from the Inuit field of Qallunology, the study of white people. The article essentially argues that while Freire is generally upheld as a liberator in progressive educational communities, his

conception of education is part of a legacy of colonization; European colonizers and their descendents claim to know what is best for Native groups. Rasmussen argues that institutions have not historically had the best interests in mind for Native populations and have worked to undermine Native cultures, languages and religions; the institution of education is not exempt. For example, compulsory education in North America has systematically devalued Native oral traditions, spirituality, and ideas about authority. This work helped to deepen my understanding about liberatory education. What one group of people may find liberatory, another may feel is oppressive. Articles like this one help to complicate my idea of what it means to achieve liberation and the ways it may be reached.

When considering Freirean pedagogical methods, it is also important to look at the ways they have been transferred (or attempted to be transferred) to other historical, social and political contexts. In Chicana without Apology, Chicana Sin Vergüenza, Eden Torres discusses the difficulties she faces as a woman of color trying to employ Freire's methods in her classrooms. When she tries to use his principles of anti-authoritarianism, engaging each student in the learning community, and empowering students to feel their own power, she runs into students with unchecked internalized dominance that don't treat her with respect. Torres explains that critical pedagogues are often working from the assumption that teachers always automatically possess authority (78). She recognizes that many students are "openly hostile" to teachers that use non-traditional teaching methods. However,

while all teachers may deal with such hostility... we know that racism, sexism, classism and homophobia reflect, create and maintain a particular kind of hostility that is not in evidence when the instructor is white, straight, male, middle class, or some combination thereof. With a sense of entitlement that comes from deeply internalized dominance, such students eagerly display their assumed superiority, social authority and their belief that they can afford to dismiss us. (77)

Torres' ideas help us to see the issues that come up when trying to apply Freire's teaching model to U.S. American classrooms where the cultural and socio-political contexts are not the same as they are in the Brazilian context. It is important to ask, who benefits the most from these non-hierarchical teaching methods? Do these teaching methods necessarily have the intended outcome when using them with students who "consciously or unconsciously identify with the oppressor" as Torres asks throughout her book, or do they merely reinforce the very systems of domination they seek to undo?

Feminist Pedagogy

Feminist pedagogy is very similar to critical pedagogy, in that one of its main goals is to question hierarchy and domination, both inside and out of the classroom. Using the lens of feminist theory, feminist pedagogues critique patriarchal teaching practices and strive to develop gender consciousness in their classrooms. Feminist pedagogy has been developed within many feminist organizing spaces as well as in Women Studies classrooms around the world (Walters). It has often been referred to as the 'action arm' of feminist theory" (Mayberry ix).

Feminist pedagogy emphasizes the importance of nurturing an emotional classroom, where students are supported to be whole beings, instead of only bringing parts of themselves to school. bell hooks is a well known feminist theorist and pedagogue. hooks theorizes about feminist learning spaces and discusses her experience in classrooms, both as a student and a teacher in her book, Teaching to Transgress (hooks 1994). As her book explores, feminist pedagogues struggle to disengage from the norm of practicing what she calls "the mind/body split" (193). A trend in feminist pedagogical theories is the importance of using classrooms as a space to critically interrogate our daily lives through a feminist lens, including the choices we make and questioning hierarchy and power dynamics. In her book, hooks also critiques critical

pedagogies such as the form that Freire has developed, as often being based in and reflective of patriarchy.

Popular Education

These previously discussed fields of education often focus mainly on classrooms within academia. Another area of radical education is called popular education, or adult education, which is community-based and is more directly related to making social change. Educators in this field “privilege experiential knowledge over knowledge that is imparted by experts” (Walters 15) and facilitate groups of people who are developing their own critical consciousness about a shared problem they perceive in their communities. There is a long history of popular education in the United States and around the world and although the styles and tasks may vary across time and place, the prioritization of participant voices and ideas is a common thread among popular educators.

We can get a sense for the values and objectives of popular education by looking at the Highlander Research and Education Center, a center for community organizing and activism which played a key role in both the labor rights movement and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Myles Horton was the catalyst for the development of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee in 1932, starting with the premise that it is people themselves that have the answers to their own problems, not outsiders deemed as authorities (Horton 1998). In his book, The Long Haul, Horton talks about the center’s purpose, as well as its ways of elevating common people:

One of the most important elements of Highlander pedagogy is the recognition that the best teachers of poor and working people are the people themselves. Rather than bringing in “experts” as resource people, Highlander brings people together, developing a circle of learners who share the same problems. Together people share their experiences, analyze their problems and learn how to work

toward basic changes in society. The goal is not reform or adjustment to an unjust society but the transformation of society. (xx)

This valuing of oppressed people's experiences and knowledge is a central idea of popular education. This movement seeks to develop participants' critical consciousness through this democratic style of grassroots community organizing rooted in acting for social change.

Another useful example of popular education and how it functions in community organizing can be found in Barbara Ransby's book, Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement, a biography of one of the greatest leaders of the civil rights movement. Ella Baker, an "activist community educator," was dedicated to democratic popular education. Baker's "view of teaching for liberation was based on the need to empower ordinary people to dig within themselves and their collective experiences for the answers to social and political questions. She did not want her students to see her as the repository of all knowledge but to discover their own insights and knowledge base" (359). Her pedagogy was "democratic and reciprocal" (359) and she "relied on the collective wisdom that resided in poor and oppressed communities" (363). Baker's commitment to democratic education and empowering her students to believe in and connect with their own knowledge and wisdom illustrates the values of popular education.

Feminist Popular Education

Within the field of popular education are feminist popular educators, who specifically center their efforts on empowering women to change the oppressive realities they face. People in this field offer critiques of patriarchal norms of popular education, give feminist alternatives to "gender blind models of popular education" (Walters 12), raise consciousness around gender issues, and work to improve conditions of women's lives. "The politics of feminist popular education can be defined as the struggle against gender oppression" (Walters 8). As with popular

education traditions that aren't feminist in nature, feminist popular education also foregrounds experience, rather than academic authorities, and has its roots in grassroots organizing (Walters).

It is important to acknowledge that, although it is challenging to locate published work in this field, it would be erroneous to conclude that this reflects a poverty of theory or work done. Conversely, much of the past and current work is either not documented or not published, due to the often underground and grassroots nature of the work.

Many feminist popular educators claim a few central components are essential to doing work in this field:

1. Women's learning must be understood and valued in its own right.
2. Women's learning must be understood within a broader social context that should encompass the social determinants of gender roles and norms.
3. The diversity of women's lives and learning should be recognized as much as the similarities.
4. Efforts are needed to overcome the limitations that continue to be placed on women's learning opportunities and outcomes. (Hayes xii)

These four claims are central to the feminist popular education movement. Women cannot be seen as individuals separate from the larger power systems in which they live. Also, depending on their social and geographic locations and their intersecting identities, women share similar and different realities. Starting with these claims offers a helpful way of jumping into the conversation about feminist popular education and gives me a feminist framework with which to approach my class. However, while we can benefit from this framework, it is difficult to transfer the methods directly because ours is a different context. Our class is different than standard feminist popular education settings due to the fact that we are in academia where participants are present because they are paying for credit and are not there solely to take action about a problem they perceive in their environment, as is the case in popular education.

Much of the discourse in this field centers around the importance of looking at the differences among women in terms of nationality, race, class, culture, ability and sexuality because methods of education in one group may not be useful in another. Shirley Walters, in her introduction to Gender in Popular Education: Methods for Empowerment, offers an analysis of interlocking oppressions with the goal in mind of addressing the diverse needs of underprivileged groups. She also gives a critique of educators appropriating methods cross-culturally, instead of developing methods uniquely applicable to their specific cultural and geographic locations.

Inherent in feminist popular education is a critique of mainstream academia because it legitimizes certain people, usually white upper-class men, as worthy of learning about and regulates what is considered “knowledge.” Many popular educators view academia as an exclusive space where access to knowledge is controlled, making it challenging for low-income people and those not traditionally welcome in higher education institutions, such as women and people of color, to gain entrance. Although women currently make up over half of the university student population in the US, the numbers of women in faculty and administrative positions are much, much lower than those of men. The numbers of women of color in these positions are much less proportionate than white women. This critique of mainstream academia by feminist popular educators also speaks to the divide between feminist educators within academia and those outside. Walters characterizes this as “the uneasy relationship between feminist theory, or the academy, and feminist practice, or the women’s movement(s)” (11). This is a common component in literature about feminist popular education.

I dabbled in some work done about the free school movement of the 1960s and 70s to help me question the traditional practices of U.S. American state supported schools. Trends in the literature discuss the ways in which people in the free school movement critique traditional student evaluation methods as well as approaches to education. Many free schools work to create environments which encourage, not force, students to learn. The schools were created in opposition to traditional public education and were built with the intention of fostering a system of participatory democracy (Miller 2000).

One example of this is the Albany Free School in New York. An article on their website discusses issues such as motivation for learning, the primary priorities for their school, and the place of participatory democracy in a school setting (Albany 2005). This school operates under the belief that all people have an innate motivation to learn, and that “learning happens best when it happens for its own sake”; grades, tests and compulsory classes actually work to shift this internal motivation to one that is external (2.) The primary purpose of the school is to develop a democratic community, where all members, including children, have an equal vote. This school also questions the competitive nature of more traditional schools and emphasizes collective and team-oriented learning instead. The Albany Free School works to include underrepresented minorities in their school and never turns students away based on lack of funds (Albany).

This literature has been useful in terms of helping me to approach our classroom as a community and to question the effectiveness of numerical grading structures. The literature also helped, not only to point out the differences in the ways that traditional and non-traditional schools approach education, but also to see the possibility of operating a classroom through participatory democracy.

Anarchism

In exploring anti-authoritarian education, it is a logical step to draw upon anarchist theories of educating, because of an anarchist goal of breaking down all forms of hierarchy. Because the term anarchy is often used incorrectly to mean total chaos, it is useful to explain the word for a better understanding. Although there is extreme diversity in the field of anarchism, a baseline principle is the goal to break down all systems of domination and authoritative government. This translates into communities having direct, oftentimes highly structured, systems of organization within which to engage with one another. The key is, people choose their systems for *themselves*.

Anarchist educators often speak of breaking down the traditional hierarchies of schools and classrooms because of its direct connection to, and reflection of, governmental bureaucracies.

Public schooling has become a prodigious bureaucratic institution that operates as a rigorous maintenance system. *Its function is to inculcate the masses with acceptable ideologies and to weed out dissenters whose recalcitrant behavior and spontaneity are viewed as dangerous to the democratic tenets of the United States.* Public education has become a breakwater interrupting the dynamics of inquiry, dissent and innovation which are essential to democracy and to the human condition. (Chappell 357)⁹

As this excerpt discusses, the traditional public education system works to maintain dominant ideologies and create passive subjects. Rather than encouraging the development of critical thinking and questioning authority, which are key components of any democratic citizen, authoritarian education epitomizes disempowerment and is the antithesis of democratic practice.

In one book on this topic, Talking Schools, Colin Ward explores the history of alternative education in U.S. America. Ward's work addresses issues such as finding places where anti-authoritarian teaching methods and community-based schools have been successful. In one

⁹ Emphasis my own.

example, he discusses how working-class parents in the 1870s favored sending their children to private schools rather than public ones because these schools “used individual as opposed to authoritarian teaching methods, and most important, they belonged to and were controlled by the local community rather than being imposed in the neighbourhood by an alien authority” (13). This example of schools based upon anarchist principles of anti-authoritarianism and keeping the power in the hands of community members was helpful to me because it calls into question state-controlled education. Ward argues the importance of keeping the power over education in the hands of the students themselves, which is a fundamental tenet of our “Radical Education” project.

Native Voices

I have done specific research to give me more background on issues that underrepresented populations face in education. One population that I prioritized in learning more about is North American indigenous peoples. I wanted to find work done by and about Native populations in an attempt to familiarize myself with some of the various issues that North American indigenous women and men face in education. My goal was to find Native women’s voices specifically, in order to understand how the issues they face may be different than those of men; this proved to be very challenging, however. Firstly, it was difficult to find articles by Native people at all. I expected this, due to racism and anti-Indianism within publishing companies, but it was more difficult than I imagined it would be. When I did manage to locate articles written by Native people, they were generally by men. The few articles I found written by Native women tended to be inclusive of all genders instead of focusing on women specifically. It is important to state this lack of research published in mainstream academic

journals, because it is reflective of greater patterns of oppressive hierarchies and limits our access to information.

Trends in work done by Native people on issues of education include ideas about self-determination and empowerment for Native communities and the importance of placing ideas regarding education in a larger historical and political context. In order to talk about current educational issues for Native people, many theorists explain, we must begin with an historical analysis of the ways that the Euro-American education system, including boarding schools in the US and residential schools in Canada, has been used as a tool of cultural and physical genocide against Native people (Graveline 1998). Trends in the literature also include the issues that Native students face at mainstream, “predominantly white universities” (Benham), the development of tribal colleges, and the importance of Native people defining their own educational priorities and needs.

One article I located by an indigenous woman, Magga Ole-Henrik, looks at specific issues for Native students in state-supported U.S. American schools. This article is helpful for me because not only does it alert me to issues that Native students face in academia, but the article also offers solutions from an indigenous perspective for improving educational systems to better address needs of Native students. The belief rooted in many of these solutions is that it is of utmost importance for people, especially for populations lacking institutional privilege, to design their own education. Communities must declare their own educational priorities, rather than receiving those imposed by a higher authority such as the government, because they are in the position of knowing what is best for their own group members. Another point Ole-Henrik offers is the crucial work of redeveloping educational systems to “promote anti-racism education” (3). This article gives me more evidence of the importance of building anti-

oppressive educational spaces, in order to create students who, instead of learning to perpetuate discrimination, can learn to question and challenge systematic domination. Perhaps most importantly, this article helped me to think about how the very definition and structures of educational spaces vary culturally. Ole-Henrik writes, “traditional indigenous education and its structures should be respected and supported” (3). This article gave me much food for thought in rethinking our framework for our project. The ways each of us approach education, including comfort levels in classrooms and our conceptions of knowledge and authority, are not neutral or coincidental, but are instead reflective of very specific historical conditions and larger systems at work.

In Renaissance of American Indian Higher Education, Benham discusses tribal colleges as an alternative to mainstream universities. She differentiates between the climates of mainstream universities and tribal colleges for Native students. “Whereas many native students experience a highly supportive environment (the tribal college), others encounter one that is often hostile to their presence (the predominantly white institution)” (222). In order to speak holistically of Native education, we must include the realities of inequalities for Native people.

Tribal communities, in which most of the tribal colleges are located, face staggering unemployment rates, ranging from 45% to 90%... In addition to economic hurdles, tribal college students and their families face many social obstacles. For example, the suicide rate for American Indians is more than twice that of other racial/ethnic minority groups, the death rate from alcohol-related causes is very high, and the already large number of single-parent households continues to increase. (219)

These statistics give us an idea of the harsh realities of Native people in the United States, and show the importance of taking a holistic view when considering issues of both mainstream education and what is at stake in terms of struggling against oppressive systems.

I am both grateful and impressed *and* greatly disappointed with these findings. While there is a wealth of ideas and literature in the field of liberatory education, it is extremely challenging to find diverse voices. Many of the authors I have drawn upon are privileged in their gender, racial, national and class backgrounds; some are not, but many are. It was especially a struggle to find work done by women of color. To find published work by Native women was nearly impossible. This is not to say that I believe work by women of color does not exist, but merely, that they are not where I am looking. I am also aware that I may be asking the wrong questions in addition to not knowing where to look to find the voices of women of color. I know that the work is done; it is just a struggle to locate it. Toward the end of my research, I became familiar with the field of multicultural education. If I had more time, I would absolutely have drawn on these important theorists and engage with their ideas.

Due to the nature of the project, it is of utmost importance to me to find the voices and perspectives of other undergraduate students about their experiences in higher education. Unfortunately, as I have come to find out, this task is next to impossible. Articles in academic journals and books about education are rarely written by students themselves, and if they are, they are difficult to locate. Even in the literature by radical educators, student voices are rarely held up to be listened to; the educators' own voices are positioned above those of students themselves. Additionally, as per usual, it was even more difficult to locate the voices of minority students. I tried to find work regarding the experiences of women and students of color in higher education, for example, but all I could find were articles written by concerned educators. This work done by allies in the institution is important and necessary. But this is also very problematic in terms of who is silenced and whose voices are emphasized.

At this point in my research, I realize even more strongly the importance of adding student voices to the discussion of pedagogy and democratic classrooms. Without these voices, we cannot truly have a well-rounded idea about what liberatory education can mean because it remains a one-sided conversation. My thesis helps fill in the gap in student perspectives within the conversation of liberatory education.

*You can't use force to put ideas in people's heads.
Education must be nonviolent.
-Myles Horton*

METHODS

Participatory Research

Creating my project with research methods that reflect my democratic, feminist and anti-oppressive values has been a significant concern to me in my research process. I believe participatory research methods, with collective inquiry and action as its main tenets, is one way to challenge oppressive research methods.

Participatory research is an investigation and an analysis of a problem by a group of people whose lives are directly affected by that problem. Participatory research differs from the more conventional kind done by experts. Instead of becoming dependent on experts, the people become experts themselves. (Horton 207-8)

The purpose of participatory research is for the participants to collectively examine their own lives and then change oppressive realities. In addition to recognizing many forms of knowledge, these methods also create space for knowledge production by participants. As Patricia Maguire articulates in her book, Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach, “participatory research places human self-determination, emancipation and personal and social transformation as the central goals of social science research” (29). Traditional research methods often treat people as objects to be surveyed, controlled and ultimately known, which reflect oppressive social conditions. Conversely, participatory research methods help rebuild people’s capacity to be creative actors on the world. The intent is to transform reality “with” rather than “for” oppressed people. Additionally, these methods reflect feminist traditions of people examining their daily lives and working to change the institutions of which they are a part. Instead of changing things “out there,” we must “dig where [we] stand” and work to change our immediate environment (Maguire).

Furthermore, by literally acting out our ideas about collective action, democracy and anti-oppression, I knew we could learn more than by only reading about these ideas in books.

One of the best ways of educating people is to give them an experience that embodies what you are trying to teach. When you believe in a democratic society, you provide a setting for education that is democratic. You believe in a cooperative society, so you give them opportunities to organize a cooperative. (Horton)

By attempting to question the individualism of traditional methods of research, I realize I am making what many academicians would consider a grave mistake. Collective work is rarely, if ever, rewarded by the university system. For example, group projects are never encouraged for senior theses or graduate level dissertations, and faculty tenure systems serve to reward people for individual work rather than group research or teaching. The collective process of developing knowledge together with the other “Radical Education” participants was one of my primary interests and I consider it one of the most valuable elements of our project.

Project Development

After doing much background reading on my own, I decided to pursue the project with others, rather than by myself. I felt that collectively developing the class would enrich everyone’s learning because the course would be developed from several people’s experiences and ideas. Initially, the majority of people I found who were interested in this topic were faculty and graduate students. While I am grateful for their support and resources, I knew from the beginning that I did not want to develop the course with faculty, but with students. I felt that developing a class without instructors present would help us as students to build skills around course development and give us an opportunity to try to do things differently. I wanted to see what kind of environment we could build by intentionally excluding faculty.

It was much more difficult to locate interested undergraduate students, which I attribute to the fact that we are not organized well. Through word of mouth, I eventually found Lisa Cherkylla and Marc Maupoux, other undergraduates interested in alternative education. The

three of us decided that we wanted to explore the topic and inform ourselves first in order to later suggest readings we might do as a class. We began with the intention to develop our class democratically, with much focus on group process and consent at every step. Each week during fall quarter 2005, we met to discuss readings, ideas and questions. The literature we read from various fields in radical education offered us both practical ideas about building democratic spaces and theoretical bases of liberatory education. Several times throughout the quarter we also met with others to gain feedback; these people were mostly educators who are radical in some sense. Among those we met with are Tamara Myers, a graduate student in Education, David Allen, Women Studies Department Chair, and educators and students at Nova, an alternative high school in Seattle. We tried to gain various perspectives in order to inform ourselves about the kinds of issues that sometimes arise in classrooms where teachers are actively trying to promote and utilize democratic teaching methods.

The three of us intentionally decided not to provide a syllabus with a pre-designed reading list or sequence of themes because we wanted to develop these things as a class. “Negotiating the syllabus offers students and teachers alternative social development, alternative ways of being, knowing, speaking, relating, and feeling, beyond and against traditional classroom arrangements” (Shor 62). We agreed with radical educator Ira Shor, who says that developing the class together creates a space for students and teachers alike to approach the classroom differently and ultimately, gain a different relationship to the ideas discussed in the class. We had the expectation that our course outline would change. We deliberately did not assign specific readings or themes to specific days because we wanted to remain flexible and open to participant feedback and planning. Our goal was to allow for students to have more control over what we would all study together.

Data Collection and Analysis

As a participant observer, I was part of the class, but I also recorded the process. I took detailed notes regarding the process and content of the class itself, including my own observations and student statements. Throughout the entire quarter, I followed a self-created standardized recording and reflection process.¹⁰ I spent several hours after class each week reflecting on questions about our classroom in terms of our dynamics, who attended, what we talked about, what kinds of structures we used and student feedback. I asked myself questions such as “what was the energy level like and how did the room feel?”, “what were the trends of the class in terms of power, energy, structure, flow and pace?”, “what seemed to be accepted “truths” and what were the points of contention and controversy?” These questions helped me to better engage with the concepts and series of events throughout the course. In addition to writing after each class, I wrote after any planning meetings or email exchanges that sparked new discussion or thought. I organized this record chronologically by week.

Following the end of the class, I used a post-class evaluation survey¹¹ to better assess the class using feedback from the other participants. The survey was divided into two sections. In the first section, participants were asked to answer questions about skill development and their overall feelings about the class. Example questions included, “to what extent has your ability to critically reflect on your own experience improved?”, “to what extent have you developed skills around democratic decision making?”, and “how much do you think this class will benefit you in your work and participation in spheres of your life outside of academia?” Participants were asked to answer the questions based on a scale of one to five. Section two of the survey was a qualitative, long-answer section where students were asked to reflect on various pieces of the

¹⁰ See Appendix D.

¹¹ See Appendix E.

class, including our process and class environment. Sample questions included “did the class feel safe to you? Why do you think this is, or is not?”, “what were the strengths of developing the syllabus together? What were the limitations?”, and “if you felt a sense of community, how do you feel it contributed to your learning?” These questions aided me in including participant theories and ideas while reflecting. Ultimately, my project analysis was grounded in the questions I/we came up with, which were organized around themes of course development and structure, course process, authority and hierarchy, class environment, results and the overarching questions.

*Without community, there is no liberation.
-Audre Lorde*

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

In this section I record the process of our class and suggest some possible interpretations. It is important to remind the reader that my reflections on the class are neither objective nor neutral, but rather have been developed through my own location, experience, and value systems. As feminist educator, Chandra Mohanty, says, “there can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship” (19). This discussion is through my own lenses, and therefore, it is about me as well as my background and perspectives. Additionally, while our situation offers commentary on greater patterns and themes in higher education, we must be careful in transferring these results to all situations. We cannot transplant the data directly, though the lessons we have learned are certainly applicable to other classrooms in mainstream universities.

I will analyze the course by discussing each week separately; I will talk about general content, why we did what we did, and weave my analysis into the discussion. I will include information about group email discussion and our planning meetings as I go, to give a general sense of our process. I will include pieces from the literature, my own reflections as well as analyses and reflections of the participants in my analysis. Reflections from participants come from both the feedback sessions built into each class as well as the post-class evaluation survey. After the ten week summaries, I will highlight the trends and theorize about the overall process in the Summary section.

Week One

Class last week was both awkward and inspiring. Lisa, Marc and I were trying to do things differently and not dominate the class. I think because of this, we erred on the side of not doing a good enough job of even explaining our intentions, but I am pleased with how we all worked through the awkwardness together.

*Personal Journal
January 10, 2006*

When Lisa, Marc and I entered the room, we sat in different places in the room, in an attempt to remove the focus from the front of the room, as well as a symbolic assertion of spreading the power throughout the room. We moved the tables so that we were all sitting in a circle; we wanted to create the physical space for people to be able to look at each other easily. Before we even began talking, this was our first attempt to de-center the usual primary authority which dominates most classrooms.

Before class started, even though the room was packed with about twenty people, no one was talking or looking at each other. Mostly, people were quietly reading or staring at the floor. The room felt very formal. As is customary in traditional classrooms, people seemed attentive, interested and polite this first day. Most were punctual, sitting up straight and maintained blank faces. This reflects traditional ways of behaving in classrooms. Students leave their personal lives at the door, practicing the “mind/body split” (hooks 135). Students are generally not encouraged to be whole people, but instead to compartmentalize and intellectualize their learning. When the students entered the classroom, they were consciously or unconsciously reflecting this norm. Most of us are accustomed to this type of learning environment which encourages students to act formally and non-emotionally. Many of us have internalized the devaluing of students’ experiences and act accordingly, checking our identities at the door.

I also found hooks’ discussion about class in the classroom useful when theorizing about this dynamic in our class.

As silence and obedience to authority were most rewarded, students learned that this was the appropriate demeanor in the classroom. Loudness, anger, emotional outbursts, and even something as seemingly innocent as unrestrained laughter were deemed unacceptable, vulgar disruptions of classroom social order. These traits were also associated with being a member of the lower classes. (178)

hooks' discussion on the ways that middle class values (ie, silence and "polite" behavior) are reinforced in the classroom gives me insight as to why student behavior was so rigid in our class. Furthermore, this offers yet another way that marginalized students, poor people in this case, are further marginalized in traditional college classrooms.

We began the class by going around the circle and giving brief backgrounds of ourselves and why we were interested in the topic of radical education. This was an attempt to "front-load" student discussion, that Shor explains as centering student voices while de-centering his own as the "expert" (60). Instead of focusing on the facilitators, we wanted to begin the class with the intent of de-centering the three of us and encouraging all of the students to voice their names and their experiences. We wanted to move from a one-way conversation to an authentic dialogue. Drawing from our readings in popular education, we wanted to begin with people's experiences in order to "privilege experiential knowledge over knowledge that is imparted by experts" (Walters 15). Instead of giving resources from "experts" (either writers in the radical education field or ourselves as facilitators), we tried to focus on students' own ideas about their classroom experiences. There was resistance to this focusing on experiential knowledge. When our class began differently than traditional classes, with a move away from an authoritarian environment, there was anxiety and confusion. Some students did not engage in the conversation, which I believe happened for many reasons, including distrusting our intentions and feeling confused as to what our class should look like, to name a couple. As hooks says, "transgressing boundaries [is] frightening" (hooks 9). It is important to respect where students are at and remember that unlearning our traditional ways of learning can be a very scary process.

I believe one reason the resistance occurred is because what we were attempting to construct was very different from students' expectations.

They expect an authoritarian rhetorical setting: teacher-talk, teacher-centered standard English, an official syllabus with remote subject matter, and unilateral rule-making. This non-negotiated rhetoric prescribes the knowledge to be learned and the rules to be followed. (Shor 16)

There was a range of responses from the participants, but the overall climate of the room felt uncomfortable and confused. Some were anxious to get the details hammered out right away, including which readings we would have, what our assignments would be, and grading policies. They wanted to know what was expected of them and what they needed to do in order to get a good grade. In a traditional classroom, these are all vital questions for survival, but when we bring a different set of intentions, these questions become obsolete. Instead of controlling each person's learning and deciding what they will learn and evaluate whether or not they have learned at the end, we had the goal of building a genuine and honest learning community where we hold the responsibility to learn collectively.

Bringing these different intentions implies radical cultural change and is perhaps, one of the more ambitious goals of our project. When we did not give definitive answers to student questions, and kept repeating our intention to build the syllabus together, there was some hesitation, confusion and irritation; we, as facilitators, were not filling the space. These questions and discomfort with constructing the class differently are proof of our training in being accustomed to being given the rules; we are used to someone else saying what knowledge is and how we should learn.

The first class was rough because it was so radically different from what most of us had ever experienced before and it was a challenge to even articulate our hopes and ideas for the class. Reflecting back on the idea of developing the syllabus together, one student says in the post-class survey, "Developing the syllabus was an immediate way to begin the project of

democratization (of the class as well as our mindsets, expectations).” As this student explains, stating that we wanted to develop the syllabus together helped us to present our intentions.

We gave the class a course outline,¹² which described our intentions, background and goals for the course, but did not spend much time on it in an attempt to de-center ourselves. We also gave an annotated bibliography of the readings we had done and suggested for our class readings. It was our goal to offer our resources without simply stating the way it would be. As I will discuss later, developing the class syllabus together, in our attempt to be democratic but also efficient, turned out to be one of the more challenging tasks for us.

After a mid-class break, things loosened considerably and people started claiming the space as their own. After Lisa asked, “Do you all think it is pointless for us to have a class like this at UW?” people started opening up. It went from no one really answering to a group conversation about the need for this class. Another question ignited a conversation, “What’s wrong with hierarchy?” Responses were of two sorts. One woman, who dropped the class after the first day, said there isn’t anything wrong with hierarchy. On the other hand, Martin and Cassandra, had different responses. Martin, a self-identified anarchist, said that hierarchy in classrooms reflects the authoritarian state and Cassandra said that she was very frustrated with traditional education and was excited to develop a space without hierarchy. I noticed that there were a couple of people who seemed to feel more comfortable in the setting, one of whom was a graduate student, Jo¹³, and one of whom had graduated with a BA in women studies, Katie. Both of these students had previous experience with critical thinking about social justice issues and questioning authoritative systems. Jo shared that she lived in a co-operative house where she has

¹² See Appendix B.

¹³ Names have been changed to protect the privacy of participants. In order to avoid using the power I have as a researcher to rename people as I see fit, participants had the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms. I believe in the power of people keeping their given names because of familial and cultural significance and found that letting people choose their own names was a satisfactory way around the predicament.

had much practice with group processing and Katie's background was in Women Studies, a field which has a history of being better at questioning traditional pedagogies than others.

A few people suggested we have a couple of readings from Teaching to Transgress since they knew that was one of my primary inspirations for the development of the course. The class agreed to have Lisa, Marc and I choose the best chapters to start with since we had read the book. We chose the Introduction, as well as sections titled "Engaged Pedagogy" and "A Revolution of Values: the Promise of Multicultural Change."

We left time for each student to check out and offer feedback about the class. We continued with this feedback for the entire quarter and found that these sessions were often the most rewarding part of each class. Some personal connections were formed between students, and it felt like a jump start for developing trust. The session gave people a chance to talk about needs that weren't met and suggestions for next time, in addition to looking deeper into some issues collectively. Jo, the graduate student with a lot of experience in group processing, shared two very different perspectives. The first time we went around the circle for feedback, she commented that she felt the class was disorganized, unclear, slow, awkward and uncomfortable. After she spoke, other people commented on the importance of silence, questioning hierarchy and inquiring within as to *why* we feel discomfort with this process. After we had all given feedback, Jo commented again. Rethinking her original comment, she felt grateful, after the pain was over, that we (Marc, Lisa and I) didn't fill the gaps. She said that she knew that everyone was looking to us to take the lead but we refused, so others eventually had to claim the conversation, work through their discomfort and just look each other in the eyes. In a different vein, another student, the woman who had previously said that there is nothing wrong with hierarchy (and dropped the class immediately after the first day), said that our class had

strengthened her belief in the importance of hierarchy because otherwise, nothing will get done. I was disappointed that she did not wait to see what might happen given more time, but understood her mistrust of doing things differently.

By the end of the class, there was already more of a feeling of community and caring than in most of my other classes, even by the end of the quarter. Some students talked openly with each other and we began talking about having fieldtrips and doing outside activities together. People lingered in the classroom, not anxious to leave like in many other classes. I felt warmed by solving the problems that arose together and talking to one another a bit more honestly than usually happens in classrooms.

Week Two

I am so frustrated! I am here to learn like everyone else and I don't have any magic tricks up my sleeves to make things go smoothly. I really don't want to keep the power that I see my professors get because I know how easily that can be abused, but it's feeling harder to share power than I thought it would be.

*Personal Journal
January 17, 2006*

The second week, we had even more people than the first. It wasn't as slow and awkward as the first session. Partly, I think that had to do with people beginning to trust our intentions to develop a supportive and authentic learning community, but I also think it is because I facilitated more actively, trying to recognize that facilitating does not equal domination. Some students expressed that they were ready to engage, yet still felt hesitant and frustrated. No one came to our planning meeting about the class, so it still felt like Lisa, Marc and I were developing the class by ourselves. We expressed again, as we had the first week, our hope that as many people as possible would come to our weekly planning meetings in order to build community and also to aid us in developing the class together.

We started by introducing ourselves again and exploring our definitions of democracy. Then we tried to set an agenda, but instead of setting it, we jumped around between setting/following it and just talking about things as they came up. There was a lot of resistance to processing and trying to decide how to make decisions collectively. I feel that this happened because most of us are not used to making decisions collectively with others, where we openly state our needs and interests. This was also difficult because many students did not know each other and therefore felt uncomfortable going through this process without the comfort of known allies. I felt awkward about this and hated it while it was happening. As part of a discussion, we collectively decided that we would each grade ourselves in order to keep the process ultimately consensual. Marc, Lisa and I gave more background from where we are coming from and how our project got started, in an attempt to build trust and be transparent about our process.

Our attempt to set an agenda and have a discussion about grades and class processes took about half of the two hour class. The energy level rose during our break, as it did the first time. When we came back, we made a list of glossary terms we wanted to clarify from the readings we had chosen the first week and then broke into small groups to do so, at the request of a few students. During the first class, one student asked for clarification on terms and the group decided that keeping definitions of terms would help us to break down the inaccessibility of the terminology which can often interrupt learning. By following students' requests and suggestions immediately, I believe we began to set up the climate differently than traditional classes. This was a fast way to show the group that we were fully serious about developing the class in a way that felt good to the group.

During the feedback session that day, some people said they liked it better than the first class because it felt more forward moving and because of the small group discussion. Scott, a

student who had some experience with alternative classrooms, gave his opinion that we shouldn't rush through our learning because we need to show an example of radical education with our class and the process of developing the class together is important.

In the post-class survey, one student said, "I would describe the process-based discussion as frustrating and boring. I felt like it was a waste of time and as usual there are people who tend to dominate and others who hardly share.... at the same time I felt committed to the process and the democratic ideal."¹⁴ Another student responded very differently in the survey:

Process-based discussion seemed like it was a struggle for everyone. But I loved it, because it illustrated just how much we take for granted in our classrooms, and how hard it is to really make a decision about anything collaboratively. I think it was a great learning experience for us as a group to stumble through making collaborative decisions.

I hoped for responses like this to come from the class. I wanted students to question their own experience within classrooms and ask why many of us do not have the most basic skills of functioning in spaces that do not have one "authority" and where we are all collectively responsible for developing our learning space.

In class, we decided that the people who go to the weekly planning meetings should propose our agenda for the class to modify and either approve or reject it. Regina, a returning undergraduate, raised her concern that not everyone is talking or being heard. Throughout the quarter, Regina often spoke about her concern to balance our participation.

I felt very frustrated with this class session because it felt like the responsibility was only on the shoulders of Lisa, Marc and I to make the class go well.

Students come to class expecting the teacher to do most of the talking, because that's the way education has been done to them so far. Education, they have learned, means being talked at, and many are simply used to being enknowledge[d] [sic] with the teacher firmly in command. (Shor 67)

¹⁴ I have corrected obvious spelling and grammatical errors in all feedback from the post-class survey because I find them distracting as a reader.

Trying to develop a learning community where we all share power was extremely challenging. Most people in the class still expected us to do all of the facilitating and directing. I felt like people gave me more credibility than I deserved, not because I hadn't worked hard on the project, but because I hadn't yet had the time to earn their trust. I had the feeling that they were giving me much power over their learning without me ever having earned it. This seems reflective of the power and credibility students often give to instructors, without *them* ever having to earn it. On the other hand, how much automatic authority students give to a professor depends on how "credible" they appear. This is, of course, code for access to social power in terms of race and gender, among other markers. Students are more likely to see whites and men as credible, for example.

In considering this more, one of the questions I asked myself was, would I have been given less automatic authority if I was a woman of color? Would I have been given more if I was a white man? Reading about the experiences of Eden Torres', a Chicana professor at a mainstream university, especially pushed my thinking about this. "Both critical and feminist pedagogy encourage teachers to give up their authority in order to create an empowering environment, but they both 'assume that all teachers automatically have authority' (Torres 78). This demonstrates how incredibly vulnerable it is to de-center oneself as an instructor in order to share power with students; by giving up power, teachers run the risk of a loss of respect and "authority" they might have gained otherwise. As Torres states, taking this alternative route can be especially painful and counter-productive for women of color and others who do not have access to the automatic authority given to white male professors.

Apart from my questions as a facilitator, I also had questions about my own process of trying to learn collectively because I certainly do not have much experience learning in

community-oriented, democratic spaces. I had questions about the implications of having more power over my own learning. For example, does having more control over what I'm learning necessarily have to mean that I am more responsible for making sure things go well?

Week Three

Student feedback

Four students dropped the class during the first three weeks of the class. One student, Brianna, shared with me her reasons for dropping.

I see an imbalance of power because the three of you came to the class with previous ideas and knowledge and some stuff that you had worked through, stuff that I know I did not have at the time of our first meeting, and you withheld it. I understand that this was done for fear of exercising control over the people who signed up for the class, but you came to the class with ideas about what it would and would not be, The decision was communicated, not directly and out loud "you will do this," but, rather, through a silent "we will not be doing this."

Brianna's feedback gave me much to consider throughout the quarter, and I am grateful to her for her honesty. By being as open as possible with the class about the assumptions and frameworks Marc, Lisa and I had, we hoped to sidestep some of the unquestioned power professors have in creating syllabi without student feedback or knowledge of student interests. The three of us recognized that not every student would be interested in learning the things we wanted to learn. For this reason, we tried to make our process and interests as transparent as possible, (while at the same time, making it clear that we would develop our syllabus collectively) in order to help students decide if they wanted to be a part of the group. It was a constant struggle to share our resources with the class, which seems to be a part of what Brianna was concerned about. I am disappointed that she did not feel comfortable sharing her concerns in the class, which ultimately, would have been a triumph of our democratic process. However, I

understand her hesitation because traditional classroom environments, in which most of us have learned how classrooms operate, do not allow for this kind of honesty.

I do think it is relevant to share that Brianna spoke with me later on in the quarter and expressed that she felt she had prejudged our process and regretted dropping the class. Through other emails, it is my conclusion that she falsely equated the concept of “no authority” to mean “no structure” which was not our claim. Instead, we wanted to have a classroom where we openly discussed hierarchies and their effects on our learning, as well as leaving space to declare our own structure in a flexible and collective way. I do believe we were not as clear about our intentions and goals as we might have been in the beginning, so this certainly may have colored people’s perceptions of the project.

Class Session

There were a lot fewer people at the third session. I battled internally with myself over what this might mean. Was the process of unlearning hierarchical pedagogy too painful? Or were we just boring everyone to death?

Participants on day three seemed interested, engaged, and mostly had a high energy level. The class got off to a great start, especially because a student brought food even though she couldn’t stay for the class. I took this as a sign that our community is building and that students are beginning to feel responsible to the group.

We used the agenda that was proposed by the planning group. It went a lot easier than the previous time because we had some direction. First we made room for unresolved concerns and check-ins. Then we spent about ten minutes doing a brainstorm about ideas, readings, and themes by milling around and writing all of our ideas up on paper on the wall. People had had the previous two weeks to review the resources and book summaries we had given, including a

list of readings Marc, Lisa and I suggested. We also brought many books to class for students to look at and decide what seemed interesting to them. Part of our intention in posting our ideas around the room was so that we could continue to claim the space as our own, as well as for people to mingle and connect. We also felt it was important for each student to feel like their ideas were important. We read through the ideas briefly as a group to get a sense for people's interests, but spent most of the allotted time talking about how to make decisions as a group. Some were frustrated and confused as to why we were even talking about it. We decided to use a thumbs-up or down system to gauge general feelings, and try to reach consensus most of the time.

In the post-class survey, one student reflected on the process-oriented discussion: I was often frustrated with what felt to me like a slow pace in the process discussions. Part of this is certainly the fact that I have internalized the dominant classroom patterns of basically not talking about process and leaving it all up to the teacher to guide. I understand that I should question this dominant format, but at the same time, I do value being able to spend the vast majority of the class hours talking about the content. I guess it's what I've come to expect from class--that we will talk about the readings and ideas--and this is what I feel like I learn the most from. I didn't feel like I was learning very much from the process-based discussions, because I don't think we were using a very efficient or deliberate process. For example, at Sherwood house meetings we have a specific protocol that keeps things moving and enables us to come to democratic decisions rather quickly. With this new group, it was hard to start from scratch and not even have any protocol about the process of making proposals, voting, etc. So I think a lot of the conversation was very tentative because people were unsure of exactly what they were 'supposed' to be doing and saying. And of course, everyone wants to be good and dutiful in the process, so people end up shying away from saying anything. These sorts of silences often dominated the process-based discussions, which I found frustrating and not a good use of class time.

This response shows how unpracticed many students are in trying to develop classes democratically, where we all have power over how things will be done. Many students "don't know how to use authority or to negotiate the curriculum (few, if any, democratic models have crossed their experience; they have rarely or never practiced developing the syllabus before and

have become authority-dependent” (Shor 18). Often, in their “authority-dependence,” students were at a loss as of what to do or say. As this student’s response above shows, we are used to being given the rules by teachers and never having to question them openly or create alternatives. This respondent also offered explanations as to why we had trouble making group decisions: “It was hard to start from scratch and not even have any protocol about the process of making proposals, voting, etc.” I agree that without an example of how to do things, we were not as efficient or stumble-proof as we could have been. Part of this was because the process was so new to most of us and part of this is because we often expect the classroom to be stumble-proof, with no uncomfortable silences, with everything planned out, down to the minute.

Another student also commented on the silences in our class.

Democratic conversations can mean two different things, I have discovered: everybody talks, and facilitation includes navigating that conversation... encouraging quiet people, and making spaces for thinking. There is also where nobody says much, because people are afraid to be undemocratic/talk ‘out of turn.’

Therefore, these silences that “often dominated the process-based discussions,” as the previous student described, were out of fear and confusion as to what is the “right” or “best” way to be democratic. We do not have much experience in democratic spaces, and therefore, we remained quiet, afraid of being vulnerable or making a mistake.

Also during this class, we discussed having a facilitator, and the benefits and drawbacks of that. Some thought we needed one, while others were hesitant to add that role. There were concerns that having a facilitator may translate into one person dominating. Also, I raised my concern that if one person facilitates, does that mean that everyone else can just let go of their responsibility to help the class go well? Whose responsibility is it to make the class go well? I am reminded again by Teaching to Transgress:

There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community. Often before this process can begin there has to be some deconstruction of the traditional notion that only the professor is responsible for classroom dynamics. (hooks 8)

By agreeing that we all need to take the initiative to help the class go well, we questioned the commonly held belief that it is best when only one person holds the responsibility to develop a successful class. Our class decided that we should try to rotate the role in order to sidestep some people dominating and also to stop looking at ‘the three’ to facilitate.

We took a break, came back, and jumped into small groups of our own choosing. They were imbalanced, but most people felt comfortable enough to just gravitate toward certain people. Most of the males stayed in one group. The other two groups had all women except one. Small groups went well; people were slow to come back from them.

During the feedback session, the general consensus was that the class felt better because it felt like we were taking active control of our time, and not just waiting for a single person to make a decision. Some didn’t feel good about the structure talk and said it took too long. Martin, who repeatedly expressed frustration with processing as a group through several classes, said “I don’t see why we can’t just talk about the readings.” Katie, the student with a BA in Women Studies, responded to Martin directly by saying that she felt it was valuable to talk about process because it is so connected to the theory we were reading and that it is always inevitable to have struggles when we question the way things are traditionally done.

Lynn, a transfer student from Arizona, said that she felt uncomfortable because she was unused to classrooms like ours and was unsure about what to expect, but expressed her willingness to try something new. She articulated her view that one of our main goals should be forming relationships because she saw it as more important than “knowledge” building in the

more traditional sense of the word. Some wanted more time for discussing the readings while others really liked talking about decision-making because we're creating the class as we go. It was also generally agreed upon that our collective way of making decisions, the simple thumbs up/down technique, was working more smoothly than previous classes.

At the end of class, we decided on readings and assignments for the next time. Based on group interest, we chose chapter two from Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and "Paulo Freire," from bell hooks' Teaching to Transgress. We decided on these readings because a few students in the group had heard of Freire and were anxious to dive into his theory. We agreed to use hooks' book in conjunction with Freire because she offers a feminist critique of his work and explains her own values as a feminist theorist and pedagogue. I believe beginning the class readings with the voice of a radical woman of color helped set the tone for the class, and to immediately de-center whiteness as the standard. Additionally to the readings, we decided to all create art projects as a way to build trust and community. The theme for our projects was to create a project about ourselves and our communities and share them with the class.

Overall, the pace was faster and the comfort level was up. There was less time between talking and people were less polite. Students still looked to me to jump in and take control of the conversation. I verbalized that I didn't feel comfortable with that always happening because I felt like it put the responsibility to make things go well on only one person instead of the whole group.

Around this time, I began to realize what a slow process it can be to unlearn all of these ways we've been taught education should go. We were still talking about decision making (and not everyone was on board for that) on the third week. Things were slow going and it was painful at times.

Week Four

Planning Meeting

The people that had volunteered to be the facilitators for week four came to the planning meeting. I believe they felt more comfortable in this role because they both had previous experience facilitating meetings. Amanda, the graduate student, was simultaneously teaching another class throughout that quarter. Gregory had experience in developing an anti-authoritarian class the previous quarter. They both also had much experience with group processing because of their shared housing in a local student cooperative.

During the meeting we spent half the time trying to figure out a way to develop the sequence/content of our coursework without Marc and me just saying how it should go. I pushed for doing it collectively as a class, but others were frustrated with not having enough time for the readings. Amanda expressed her desire to do less processing and more discussing of the readings. This tension between remaining democratic *and* efficient was a huge challenge for us, especially since many of us had little experience in group processing or democratic classrooms. This was a source of constant frustration, especially in the first part of the quarter.

Class session

The class size evened out around week four with about fifteen people. Our fourth meeting was a turning point for us in terms of community building. We began with “extreme” checkouts, where we all went around and shared our art projects. People shared some vulnerable things, such as outing themselves as queer and giving more background about their lives. One student shared their¹⁵ feedback about how this piece affected their learning, “I loved that we made a point to get to know each other in the classroom. The art projects we each did was great. I feel

¹⁵ When talking about an anonymous student, I opt for using “their” and “they” as gender pronouns instead of “her/his” and “she/he”. Despite the grammatical awkwardness, I find “their” and “they” useful as gender-neutral language because they can aid us in stepping outside binary gender language.

that community was built from our individual responsibility to the class and our shared interest in the class succeeding.” The art project was an effective way to get to know each other and raise the trust level in the class. As hooks says, “since the vast majority of students learn through conservative, traditional educational practices and concern themselves only with the presence of the professor, any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone’s presence is acknowledged” (8). Getting to know one another and beginning to build community was a primary goal of our classroom experience and this art project allowed us all a way to acknowledge the presence of each student.

Several people mentioned that the art project was the only reason they came to school that day and that they really enjoyed getting to know people more intimately. Two students said that they didn’t feel well and were going to skip all of their classes, but ended up coming to our class out of a sense of responsibility to the group. This proves that our project began to shift the learning climate from one of external motivation (grades or avoiding punishment) to one of internal motivation (responsibility to the group). Acting to avoid punishment is a very different learning motivation than acting out of caring for the well-being of ones’ classmates and learning environment. When students have power over their learning (what they will learn and how), and over their grades, motivation must come from somewhere else. This is one way in which we attempted to radically shift the learning climate of the university.

There was an immediate change in the classroom climate after we shared our art projects. I observed that there was more and longer-lasting eye contact between students and the noise level of the room rose considerably. After sharing our projects, we added to the glossary of terms as an entry point into the readings. We decided afterward that it wasn’t really useful to do as part of class and instead, we could just keep a running glossary of terms for people to add to along the

way. Doing the glossaries in class took up time that we really could have used for large discussion. In Teaching to Transgress, hooks reminds us, “agendas [have] to be flexible, [have] to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction” (7). Maintaining flexibility in classrooms is an essential part of developing an engaged pedagogy which recognizes student moods and feelings. We tried to embody this throughout the quarter.

After the art projects, we began our large group discussion. Participants found the readings intriguing, especially since hooks speaks directly to Freire in some parts of her work. Calla, a junior at UW, said she felt very changed by reading hooks’ theories and said that she was already beginning to view her classes in a completely different light. The facilitators, Gregory and Amanda, posed provoking questions to the group and there was dialogue between group members. For example, one question about Freire’s banking model, “is it ever good to use banking model?” started our engagement with his theories. We theorized about the development of critical thinking skills in students, as well as the broad topic of working to change the system of which we are a part. Genevera, who comes from a background of alternative education, argued that a cultural revolution is more important than changing individual classrooms. We began to grapple with two questions we would revisit throughout the rest of the quarter: how much can we work within the system to change that system? What role do students play in terms of transforming the classroom?

Our discussions began to flow better around this time of the quarter, which I believe was a direct correlation to actively building community through more participants spending time together outside of class and, of course, to the art projects. One student responds in the survey about their sense of community and how it helped their learning,

It helped so much. It made me feel like I was a part of something, something that I did not want to let down, and something that I was excited about and wanted to

help succeed. It caused me to be much more invested in the class than I have been in most of my other classes because I was invested in the other people who were just as much a part of the class as I was.

This student clearly felt a part of a greater community where they felt responsible to the group. Another student disagreed in their survey response, “I felt some people weren't really committed to the class, when others were really putting themselves out there.” In other words, there was an unequal dynamic of who felt a sense of community and who did not. This seems related to the fact that not everyone spoke in class on equal levels.

Some felt the organization and flow was an improvement in this class session. Cassandra, who had been excited the first class to try something new, said she just felt bored, thought we were regressing to normative classroom behavior and methods, and that she liked it better when we were fumbling. Multiple people shared that they cling to structure and this is one reason it was so difficult to do things differently.

It was a struggle in this session, as in all of them, to work towards collective group facilitation. We wanted to make facilitation all of our role instead of relying on one person to take charge. During this week, we began to get much better at making group decisions. It took us about a month to be more open about what we wanted to happen in the class, though this never happened for some participants.

At the end, we decided that it would be helpful to learn more critiques of the critical and feminist pedagogy fields. I suggested Derek Rasmussen’s “Qallunolgy: Pedagogy for the Oppressor,” an article offering a Native perspective on Freire’s theory. Genevera suggested Aileen-Morton Robinson’s article, “Whiteness, Epistemology, and Indigenous Representation” to further our discussion about systematic oppression and de-centering whiteness.

Group Email Discussion

Because we were beginning to realize halfway through our course that two hours once a week for ten weeks was really no time at all to unlearn undemocratic pedagogies, develop an intimate community and effectively delve into difficult readings, I urged the group to use our class email more often.

I put out questions to the group to give more opportunity for students to reflect and express their ideas about our content and process. I also wanted to model what I hoped others would do: express how they were feeling about the course and to say what was *not* working well for them. I find it useful to record their responses here, in order to de-center myself as the only source of analysis for our course. I raised three issues which I felt warranted more discussion and wanted more feedback from students about specifically: selecting readings, class pace and our process.

For readings, I asked, ‘where is it best to develop our sequence of course readings?’ and ‘is the order of our readings important?’ I wanted to know how Marc, Lisa and I (and the other folks who had a background in democratic education) could best put our resources out on the table without unfairly dominating the class. One student responded that she wanted to hear more about what Marc, Lisa and I would suggest since we had background, although she liked the “openness of format where the class ultimately decides what to read.” She expressed that at first she wanted us to give a reading list but then decided that it would be better for the whole class to decide. Another student agreed that we should all have a say in what we read, but feedback from people with resources is helpful.

In thinking about how to share resources democratically in the classroom, one student reflected later in the post-class survey, “Whenever there is somebody with a significant degree of knowledge that is more than the rest of the group then the group or that person must find some kind of way to allow learning to occur in an organic, spontaneous and collaborative way.” I hope that my questions through email sparked ideas and questions in students’ minds, but I did not receive much feedback at the time I sent the email.

In thinking about the pace of our class, I expressed that I felt rushed through the readings and wanted to know if others felt the same way. “Why are we spending one week per set of readings? Is this because we’ve been taught to do this or because it feels like the best pace? What are we afraid of?” I wanted to articulate a bit of my own process about thinking critically about what we have been taught is an acceptable classroom pace. I wanted to know if others thought our rush was influenced by craving that sense of efficiency we have in “normal” classes when everything is already figured out for us, but that we did not have in our class because we had to recreate the wheel in some ways. I wanted to push more—is this efficiency the best way for us to learn together? Both students that wrote back to this question agreed we were rushed and that it is not helpful for learning democratically or collectively. I did not receive more than two responses and the ones I did receive basically agreed with and reflected my own opinions. I felt frustrated with this lack of further discussion on email, but was hopeful that people would eventually begin using the email list as a way to communicate better with each other.

My last question was about our process. I explained my observation that many people seemed resistant and uncomfortable when we were trying to have a discussion about group decision making processes. I posed a question: “is it ever safe to assume that we are all on the same page and that we *don’t* need to talk about our process? Is this an essential part of

democratic environments?” Again, the two responses I did get were in agreement with my own assertions. Perhaps this was because my questions were leading questions. I was disappointed with the lack of engagement with my call for discussion. One student said, “it's really important to make sure everyone is participating, at the very least in the decision-making. To me this is what democracy is, the people decide.”

Class Session

As decided on in the previous class, our readings were “Qallunology: Pedagogy for the Oppressor” and “Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation.” Regina, a self-identified “shy person,” and Lynn, transfer student from Arizona, facilitated. In our planning meeting, we decided to use an activity to help people be more aware of their verbal participation. In this activity, participants were given a small number of tokens, such as pennies, which represent the amount of times they could speak. Once they used all their pennies, they could not speak again until everyone had used their pennies. Our agenda for the day was to check-in, as we did every week, to give each student a chance to make their voice heard, talk briefly together about course outline, small group discussion, large group discussion and end with check-outs and feedback.

Around this time in the quarter, we began to find that in conjunction with talking about the ways that hierarchies function in the academy, we had to talk about social hierarchies within the U.S. more broadly. As we built trust with one another and the questions became deeper and more personal, we moved away from explicitly talking about classroom practice, and discussed systems of domination and oppression, as we see them playing out in our own lives. This is an example of utilizing Freire’s concept of ‘conscientization;’ in other words, we developed a

consciousness about our immediate surroundings in an attempt to change oppressive realities (Freire).

Because the group was sick of group process content, such as deciding what to read, we spent only the bare minimum of time to choose the following week's readings and moved to small group discussion. In my group, I asked what people's personal relationship to the readings were and we continued in this vein when we moved to large group discussion. There was dialogue about privilege and whiteness, based out of the "Whiteness" article. Issues that were raised included asking how a person can use their racial privilege to fight the system that gave that privilege, interlocking oppressions and privileges, and seeing whiteness as the norm. Gregory, a student of color, put himself in a more vulnerable position by sharing information about his background and experiences. Toward the end of class, the discussion became candid for awhile and people began to let their guards down. Scott, a white student, mistakenly assumed that everyone else in the room was white, and, within a conversation about challenging the normativity of whiteness, this was extremely ironic. Two students of color spoke up to correct him about how they identified. Right at the end of class, we started to have more intense dialogue, with people making themselves more vulnerable and taking risks; people were really frustrated when we had to stop for check-outs.

While some people in the group felt they had a grasp on the concept of white privilege, others seemed more hesitant to talk about the topic, and very unsure about the "correct" language to use. We agreed to include more readings about unlearning racism. Though we didn't explicitly discuss our collective intention in this, my own thought is that this part of the class was absolutely crucial in helping us to begin/continue the process of unlearning racism and questioning white privilege. In my mind, this is a crucial piece of rethinking education as

liberation because we can think critically about traditional educational practices which center those that are dominant in society. We decided to read Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," which is a tool for people first thinking about the ways that white privilege affects them daily, and an article from Chicana Without Apology, "Wisdom and Weakness," by Eden Torres. Torres' article is about her experience as a Chicana woman in the academy trying to use Freirean pedagogy.

We decided at the end of class that the token system created a false environment and people were hesitant to talk because of it. One person who tended to dominate didn't participate at all. I believe it was a useful tool to help people be more conscious of their participation, but we decided it was not something we would want to keep using on a regular basis.

Overall, some people were still dominating the class in their verbal participation. There was a correlation between the people talking the most and the people with experience in democratic and alternative classroom settings. There was still some hesitation because of the sensitive material. The dynamic was serious, calm and lacked vigor. Genevera expressed hesitation to engage more emotionally because she didn't know if it's worth it to get "all worked up" and put herself on the line. I interpreted this to mean that there is not enough trust in the classroom and that we have not yet made enough space for emotionality in the classroom. We had not yet explicitly theorized on the value of emotions in the classroom. There was still a lot of self-censorship going on. During checkouts, Lynn expressed frustration that we were all so apparently calm when discussing issues of violence and oppression, and wished we could be more emotional and excited. Again, I interpret this as students reflecting dominant behavioral norms where excitement is seen as impeding the learning process. This is similar to what hooks talks about, "excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the

atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process” (hooks 7). Students in our class were hesitant to be their whole selves in the classroom because this is generally not seen as favorable classroom etiquette. Feeling excited, sad or angry impedes our learning, and, it is often argued, disrupts our ability to be objective (hooks).

Week Six

Planning Meeting

In this meeting, Martin, who had previously been very resistant to planning and process discussion volunteered to be a facilitator. He, Lisa and I met to plan the sixth class. A goal for our meeting was to try to determine the needs of the class that weren't being met. We wanted more tools to bring about a meaningful discussion, and specifically, a more emotional discussion. Drawing on our reading from Teaching to Transgress, we decided that nurturing an emotional environment in the class would help us, not only to enter the class as whole beings and apply the readings to our own lives, but also to build community. We took a clear stand that emotionality is not the opposite of academia and voiced our desire to let go of the division between thinking and feeling, which privileges the intellectual over the emotional.

We also expressed our desire to let go of pressure to learn the “right” information from the right “experts” in order to have a meaningful conversation and connect with each other. In this planning meeting, we decided that our new definition of engagement was that everyone should feel like they have had the space/time to say how they think/feel. We ended our meeting with the intention of fostering an environment where all people can participate and not just those “with something to say.”

Martin sent out an email about our proposed agenda ideas.¹⁶ For the first part of our class, we proposed that we write personal reactions to the readings. Martin posed the question, “how do you personally feel about anti-racism and the institutions that perpetuate inequality? Rather than an analysis of the reading, this should be a more personal statement.” Martin also shared his thoughts on the subject, while encouraging us to engage more personally in the class. In our meeting:

It was brought up that we may be missing out on something if we leave our personal feelings outside of the classroom. I feel that I've always left that part of me outside of the classroom when I shouldn't have. It seems as though we are trying to legitimize these issues academically which is what we are all used to doing in our education; this will get us through the quarter but won't engage us with the issues at hand in a human way.

I was grateful to Martin sharing what he did and several people responded positively over email as well.

Class Meeting

We started off with quiet and low-energy people, but it improved as we moved into the discussion. Martin didn't show up, so that threw us off and added some confusion since he had the notes for our agenda and discussion ideas. The other facilitator was out of sorts for the rest of the class because she felt disappointed.

Following in the vein of our planning meeting, we started with a twenty minute exercise about how we felt about the readings, as opposed to what we thought. Our goal in doing this writing exercise was to center students' experience in relation to the readings. We wanted to create a space for students to reflect on their own experience in connection to the readings about whiteness, racism, and systematic oppression as it plays out in academia. This reasoning is similar to what Giroux discusses:

¹⁶ Our agendas always remained open to change if the group did not agree.

My use of writing assignments was closely linked to getting students to theorize their own experiences rather than articulate the meaning of other peoples' theories...Moreover, the writing assignments were constructed so as to give students the opportunity to acknowledge their own emotional and affective investments in issues regarding race, colonialism, and the politics of representation. (Giroux 172)

This space for students to “theorize their own experience” is in place of the banking model that Freire talks about where students are expected to regurgitate the ideas from the readings. Writing allows students to connect their lived experiences with those of the authors’ and engage more deeply with the ideas. After our writing exercise, we used these as part of our check-in process, in order to validate the feelings that people wrote about and felt comfortable sharing.

In the check-in, there was a wide range of responses. Only two students reflected on the main point of the chapter from Chicana Without Apology, which discussed the difficulty of transplanting ideas and approaches from one context to another. In this chapter, Torres explains the challenges she has faced as a woman of color using Freire's ideas in a space with students with internalized racial dominance. Most other people responded to the white privilege article. Lucy felt that as a biracial person, she wasn't sure where to place herself into the dichotomous division of privilege/oppression in the article. There were a few white people that felt tired because they “already know about that,” while others felt discomfort and confusion because the idea was new for them. Gregory said he felt that the article perpetuates racism because it only talks about every day privileges and not how racism is institutionalized. In general, many people expressed feelings of anger, powerlessness and frustration.

Using our writings for the check-ins proved useful because it gave us plenty of material for our large group discussion. Without missing a beat, we began to theorize about connecting theoretical values and life choices. A few questions related to the readings started us off into one

of our most intense discussion of the quarter. We talked about what it means to be an ally¹⁷, the importance and role of allies in social justice movements, and where to begin our activism. In terms of the last question, we posed the question to ourselves, ‘do we start in our own homes/communities/schools, or is it best to focus our attention in other places and other countries? Recognizing of course that this is not a binary issue, we were struggling to articulate the importance of “digging where we stand,” and thinking critically about our immediate surroundings. We also discussed how to encourage unlearning internalized dominance and strategies for building solidarity and establishing relationships between different communities for mutual aid and support.

In the feedback session, several people said they liked that we were getting to know everyone better and felt that we were beginning to have really meaningful, thought-provoking discussions that we could apply to our lives. Having this agreed-upon structure was seen as positive and we decided to continue with the same agenda for the next time. Discussion went so smoothly in fact, we decided to try not having any facilitators for the following week. A visitor in the class that day said that she really believed in the idea of student-led focus groups and suggested having one on the topic of anti-racism for the following quarter. A student shared that she was still afraid of offending people and many agreed that we were still self-censoring ourselves, but that we were moving in the right direction.

In the post-class survey, a student gave feedback about our intention to discourage students from engaging in the “mind/body split.”

The thing I appreciated most about the different atmosphere was how encouraged I felt to express my feelings and personal thoughts/emotions about either the

¹⁷ I use the term “ally” similarly to Andrea Avayzian in her essay, “Interrupting the Cycle of Oppression: the Role of Allies as Agents of Social Change.” An ally is “a member of a dominant group in our society who works to dismantle any form of oppression from which she or he receives benefit” (Avayzian). For example, a male that battles sexism can be an ally to women.

subject matter or the process in our classroom. I felt very committed to the class and to the space, very responsible for making the space feel good to myself and others—this responsibility felt empowering and different from most classrooms where students always look to the professor to govern the space. So I felt more empowered, more responsible and accountable, more committed, and more free to be what you referred to before as a whole person--to bring in all parts of myself and my life into the learning process.

As this student response shows, students often crave encouragement to include personal experiences and emotional responses to material. This allows for more engaged learning as well as deeper community engagement, elements which are crucial for empowerment in the classroom.

Week Seven

At this point in the quarter, we decided to move in the direction of looking at the intersections between critical pedagogy and popular education, shifting from an academic focus to one on community organizing. Our readings for this week were from "We Make the Road By Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change" which is a conversation between Paulo Freire and Myles Horton.

Themes from this discussion included examining the differences and similarities between educating and organizing, whether or not long term change can be made by working within the system and personal effects of racist historical (mis)representations of people of color.

Major questions for us were “can the changes we want to see in society happen in public education? Does social change happen through education or do we have to change education first? How useful is it to try to bring change within the system? Is it better to create alternative systems that compete with and eventually surpass the old ones?”

Patrick and Gregory discussed the importance of starting at home first to learn about ourselves in relation to others, in addition to doing work in our own communities first, instead of

trying to change other communities. There was some confusion, but, for the first time, people interrupted each other and asked for clarification. After this was cleared up, Lucy brought up a new point. She explained how her history as a person of color has not been taught. She began to cry as she explained how damaging it has been for her because she was not taught the history of her culture or her ancestors. Our room became really quiet. The class was not sure how to respond to this outward display of emotion. It was brushed over—after about thirty seconds of silence, people started talking about other things. I did not know how to respond to her grief, but I did not want to pretend like it did not happen, partly because we weren't supporting her in her vulnerability and partly because I felt that ignoring it would invalidate her experience as a person of color, thereby perpetuating racism. I expressed that I felt like we weren't addressing what she shared about how this particular form of racism has affected her personally, and that even though I did not know how to respond, I thanked her for sharing what she did and that it affected me really deeply to hear her speak about her experience so honestly. This class session helped me to realize even more how emotions in the classroom are generally not tolerated or acknowledged, especially when students are speaking about violence or oppression in their personal experience. We are not taught how to nurture an environment where students feel supported to be vulnerable and to relate the information we learn to our own lives. Even more, I realized that part of destabilizing the norm of the “mind/body” split is questioning and making visible class, gender, nation and race biases in our education. When Lucy engaged with the material and applied it to her own life, it became painfully obvious how the biases in traditional education affect students and cultural conceptions of history and identity.

There was more silence than usual that day. Amanda said that the feel of the silence in our class was different from others because it was not as awkward since we had an agreement

that silence is okay, and was indeed, part of the conversation. She teaches other classes as a graduate student and the silences in her classrooms are not nearly as comfortable as ours.

Students said they did not feel as much pressure to fill the silence because we had outwardly stated that we wanted there to be space for quiet thinking and processing. In the post-class survey, one student reflects on our silences:

I eventually learned that silence in a de-centered classroom does not mean the same thing as silence in a hierarchical classroom. In a hierarchical classroom silence means that the class does not know the answer to the question. It is almost an ashamed silence. Silence in a de-centered classroom could mean many things. It could be a shamed silence if the students are forgetting that there is nobody to punish them. Or the silence could be a natural pause in the conversation, or it could mean a number of things to each person in the class.

As this student says, when students are quiet in traditional classrooms, it is often in the context of a professor asking for a question. Silence implies that no one knows how to respond. It is not a conversation between equals, as this student described about our “de-centered classroom,” but instead is about the teacher having all the “right” answers.

After our conversation on silence, Gregory asked, “is UW liberal?” in the vein of starting at home, as we had discussed earlier. We talked about our own school for awhile. People expressed a lot of frustration with this institution and what they’re not getting from it. Genevera explained that she thought academia is usually very elitist, which is counterproductive for social justice movements. Academics have the power to say what “knowledge” is, how/when/where it should be taught, as well as who has access to this knowledge. This led to more discussion about what is lost when trying to work within the university system. Several students expressed their view that the university is an incredible place of promise and possibility for transforming social relations. Nora, a visiting democratic educator from Massachusetts, asserted that “nothing can be an impossible organizing space as long as we keep our eyes and ears open to learning.”

This class was a breakthrough because, for the first time, we explicitly applied our readings and the concepts to the class itself and our space. We did this in terms of talking about working within the system and turning the gaze back on ourselves and our location within the university. Because of this discussion, this session raised questions for me about our own class, in trying to develop a democratic learning space. Are we up against too much to make any serious changes? Or is our class one step in the right direction, in changing the climate of the university? I revisited these themes throughout the quarter, both in thinking about my own future as an activist and in terms of our project.

There was more collective effort to keep discussion going because we did not have a facilitator. In the post-class survey, a student reflects on our “constant experimentation.” The student says, “On some days we would have presenters or facilitators and on other days we would all be facilitators. We found, for our group, that it worked out well to have everybody be a facilitator.” Some students still looked to me to give direction, but I didn’t take the cues. I noticed that instead of filling the silence, if I waited and did not take responsibility for facilitating, others would jump in. This gives a small hint at how the class might have been different if there was a professor in the room. One student speaks to this directly in their post-class survey. Having a professor in the room “would have changed the dynamics every step of the way. During silences the class would have had a tendency to look at the professor as we sometimes looked at Sam. And at these moments the professor would have had the urge to speak.”

In the feedback session, most people explained that they liked being without a facilitator. Some said this class was the best out of the whole quarter, though they felt sad and hopeless from our discussion about working within the system. Nora, who had previously claimed her

hope for working within the system, reasserted her point that institutions aren't lost causes-we are always educating ourselves and each other, on the street, in classrooms, everywhere we go; we need to "plant seeds" of resistance. Lucy felt sad and vulnerable, but was glad she said what she did. I shared feeling frustrated because "all I have are questions!" and another student shared the same sentiment but felt confident that the answers come later. Several people said they felt very intellectually *and* emotionally engaged and others said they specifically liked the banter, when people interrupted each other and openly disagreed with each other.

We decided that for the next class, we would try to use our time to talk about our frustration in other classes, as well as coping mechanisms. We agreed to read sections of The Long Haul by Myles Horton about his theories of social justice movements, as well as how Highlander Folk School (a popular education center) got started.

Week Eight

I had a dream about the class last night. Only a few of the regulars showed up and a bunch of new people came. It was all on my shoulders to facilitate and I knew that if it failed, it would be all my fault. People started to leave because it was terrible and I felt so inadequate and unprepared.

*Personal Journal
February 23, 2006*

We had a smaller class than normal on this day. The classroom had very low energy and people expressed being exhausted from the end of the quarter workload. We started with a writing exercise about our past/current experience in our mainstream classes and situations that were challenging for us and then used this information in our check-ins. The majority of students expressed frustration, but there were a couple that were very pleased with their experience in public education. Students had varying concerns and coping mechanisms. Lucy said she drops out for awhile and then comes back when she feels better, to maintain her sanity; she feels bitter about the university because it is so isolating at times and she doesn't feel like she is getting the

kind of education she really wants. Gregory, who has been in traditional educational settings most of his life, said he usually feels isolated as the only radical voice in classrooms. One woman expressed annoyance with distancing mechanisms within intellectual circles and is concerned that classroom material often has no real world applications. Scott said he was happy with his education overall and did not feel angry during classes because individual teachers are powerless too; they have to answer to those higher above them in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Jenny said that our class was helping her to question how her junior high and high school experiences thwarted her individuality and largely shaped how she thinks it is normal to behave in classrooms now. Significantly, Cassandra, who was in her last quarter before graduating, said in all her four years of being at the UW, she never, ever approached a teacher outside of class. The hierarchy made her feel very uncomfortable. Amanda shared her experience in academia, “the system works better for me as a middle class white student than other groups of students, so I benefit and feel comfortable in this institution. It was built for me. I was raised to belong here.”

We jumped into our discussion from our check-ins, but didn't get very far because of the low energy level. Differently from other classrooms I have been in, we acknowledged the low energy level and then decided what to do from there as a group. Nobody really wanted to discuss the readings from Long Haul. Instead we talked about plans for our last session, ways to share anonymous feedback about the class, and a fieldtrip. We were all tired of readings and decided to switch gears to learning about local organizations and schools that put alternative education practices into action that interested us. For our homework, we each agreed to find one organization or school and report back about it to the group.

Week Nine

Week nine's class was a very different format from the rest of our classes. We were very laid back and had time to socialize in the beginning, before leaving on a group fieldtrip to a place called Wayward Cafe, a local, vegan, collectively run cafe and community center. We had eight people.

We had time to socialize while walking there, and then sat in a circle at the place and shared our research. People seemed really into this project and were excited to hear about the things going on locally. Some projects included Albany Free School, Seattle Young Peoples Project, Gilmore School, Comparative History of Ideas program at UW, Real Change, and Puget Sound Community School.¹⁸ A student from the Puget Sound Community School overheard us from the next table over and came and joined our table to share about her experience there.

We did not make time for check-outs because our class was so informal, but several people said that they really enjoyed hearing about other people's interests as well as learning more about what is going on in our own communities. Another student expressed interest in keeping conversations going about radical education next quarter.

Week Ten

I feel very sad about the last class, terribly afraid that it was a failure. In my pain, which stems from my fear that we failed, that I failed the class, I am finding that honestly, I want to be done with this project...because I feel like it is not worth recording at this moment. That is heartbreaking. Next month marks a year that I have been working on this project and I am scared to think that the students in the class did not actually benefit from the course. I have to say, I feel really hopeless and frustrated about our class.

Personal Journal

April 5, 2006

At this point in the quarter, I found it nearly impossible to separate my own mood from my interpretation of the class. Two of the most active members of the class were not able to come, and two others did not attend. We had about eight people that day. Everyone was quiet,

¹⁸ See References section for more information.

not talking much until about the last hour of the class. During our check-in, almost every student said they felt exhausted from the end of the quarter workload.

Our last conversation revolved around bits and pieces of course evaluation and what we each struggle with in other classes. Lucy said she continued to come throughout the quarter because of the sense of community and our intention of coming together to talk about ideas with each other; she wondered aloud what classrooms could be like if that simple intention were actually carried out. One student said that other students' resistance can sometimes be just as frustrating as the teacher's resistance in other classrooms and can impede the democratic process. A big question this left for me was 'what role do students play in terms of transforming the classroom?' Several people were feeling frustrated and hopeless. Some people felt powerless to do anything. Genevera said that we are the people she has talked to most in her entire two years on the UW campus. This is sad (though not terribly shocking, given the general climate of campus classrooms), but also reminds me of the importance of projects like this, spaces where students can come together, put their collective intentions on the table, and really connect together in an academic context without teachers present.

Throughout the class, questions kept running through my mind. Like most others in the class, I was feeling exhausted, hopeless and powerless. "Was our class a success? Was it a failure? Are people disappointed with the class, or is this a projection of my own fear?" I kept asking myself. During the class itself, I interpreted the silence and lack of energy in our last class as proof that people didn't learn much and certainly didn't gain a passion for the topics we discussed. A more comprehensive view of our class did not come to me until almost two months later from reading post-class evaluation surveys, talking with the students and reflecting over my notes.

We must be the change we wish to see in the world.
- Mahatma Gandhi

CONCLUSION

Revisiting Initial Questions

For a month following our class, I was depressed, disappointed and terribly afraid that we had failed. While I was left with many, (many!) questions, there was one which was foremost in my mind. Are democratic and anti-oppressive classrooms even possible in the context of higher education? Our goals of creating our class collectively and democratically, and encouraging a culture of resistance and a space where student experiences and knowledge were celebrated were overwhelming most of the time. Similarly, the barriers against trying to challenge whiteness and maleness as normative (culturally, academically and institutionally), made our task seem almost impossible at times. In my Conclusion, I will draw out the major points of our class, reflect on our process and attempt to bring some sense and to it all, both for myself and for the reader.

For the sake of organization, I have included my previous Questions section to aid me in my evaluation process¹⁹. In reviewing these questions, I have realized that I still do not know the answers to many of them. This time I have spent developing and participating in the class is not enough to fully know what it looks and feels like to practice education as liberation. Additionally, many of my questions have been altered, my priorities have changed and new questions that I never even anticipated have entered the picture. I recognize that this is all part of the process. What we accomplished was a small stepping stone towards education as liberation, and it is crucial to view this process not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself.

Development and Structure

As we begin developing our class, we have many questions about how to go about this while still keeping our goals in mind. These questions involve ideas about structure, physical space, student projects, workload, and readings.

¹⁹ I have chosen to use this style in an attempt to keep my document accessible and easy to use for many different kinds of audiences. I hope the way I have formatted this section will aid readers who are searching for specific ideas and find the guidance helpful when navigating this large piece.

How can we, as the three facilitators, approach the project without assuming we know the future members and their interests, and what goals we will articulate collectively? In terms of deciding on a structure for the class beforehand, how much structure will we want as a class? How can structure help or hinder the learning process? For example, how much should we, the facilitators, impose our own values and goals for the class?

In our pre-class development, we are striving to de-center those with privilege. How can we do this, even while some of us have access to these privileges? For example, how can we use our classroom to de-center whiteness as the norm, when many of us are white and we are at a predominantly white institution? What can we do to de-center maleness? How can we be sure to include readings from varying backgrounds (not just those with class/race/male privilege) when we, the facilitators, do not have control over what will we be reading and studying? For example, how can we be sure to include Native voices as well as people who do not consider themselves “academics”?

In thinking about the classroom itself, how does this space look physically different? For example, how will we arrange the chairs? Will we sit in a circle? How can we claim the classroom as our own? Will we display art or work we develop in class? To what degree will this influence our sense of community?

In terms of the final portion of our class, how will we choose to evaluate ourselves? If we choose to remove a grading system where one person has the power to numerically evaluate each person’s learning, what will take its place to motivate the group to learn and do work together?

Our pre-class development process was crucial because it gave Marc, Lisa and I space to ask some critical questions and battle our sense of isolation within the university. Though I do not discuss our pre-class development in detail in this work, it is necessary to express what an invaluable part of the process it was.

On the first day of the quarter, by not preparing a syllabus and reading schedule beforehand, Marc, Lisa and I left room for the unique interests of the participants. We shared our resources by putting together an annotated bibliography and highlighted our suggested readings for people to look over. By setting aside time in class for everyone to express their ideas and interests, we tried to collectively build the class. In retrospect, I feel the annotated bibliography idea was not an effective way for people to learn about our research. At the beginning of class, students had no context for our ideas or investment in the class. While I do not have alternative

ideas of how this could work better, I do maintain that it is better than the alternative of simply imposing readings.

I have learned to not equate structure with oppressive hierarchy. It is when structure is imposed without group consent that it is negative. Also, “in many groups, a lack of explicit structure means that only those people who feel comfortable talking (usually people with privilege) will do so” (Stout 135). Alternating between creating our agendas collectively and rotating the role between people worked well for us because it allowed more people to partake in the process. It is difficult to find a structure that works well for an entire group as a whole and it took us several weeks to settle on our system. The most awkward part of the entire quarter, in many people’s eyes, were the first few weeks. While there are several explanations for this, it is necessary to note that this was also the time when we had less structure. More than anything, I learned that structure helps some people learn while it can feel too restrictive to others. In our class, it was difficult to find a happy medium.

Starting the class readings with the voice of a radical woman of color helped to set the tone for the class, and immediately tried to de-center whiteness as the standard. Beginning the class with work by a woman of color alone is clearly not enough to challenge racism and sexism in the classroom, but it is a start. Our work in week five was absolutely crucial in helping us to begin/continue the process of unlearning racism and questioning white privilege. This is a vital piece of rethinking education as liberation because we can think critically about traditional educational practices which still center those that are dominant in society. Reading “White Privilege” by McIntosh introduced a space for us to talk about the personal sides of racism and white privilege in a classroom setting. The “Whiteness” article problematized the norm of the knowledge and research of European-Americans being validated in academia, while the

knowledge and research of Native peoples is never validated. This article was less personal, but helped us to question whose histories we have studied in school and what biases our educational experiences have had. I do not think we effectively grappled with the idea that our class was functioning in an institution which has historically oppressed Native populations in the United States. We did not delve into the ways that our very own project may have been perpetuating notions of liberation and educational practice which still kept non-Native, and often times, middle class white people at the center. Additionally, as always, we must remind ourselves of the limits of our own location. The lack of diversity at the university limited our learning, and therefore, just the act of holding this class at the university inherently curbed our ability to hear many perspectives.

When we started out by sitting in various parts of the room as the initial developers of the class, Marc, Lisa and I tried to de-center the front of the room and also disable the unidirectional norm of one person talking while others listen. Not sitting together at the front of the room was also a symbolic assertion of our desire to spread the power throughout the room. Doing this alone was not enough to build democracy in our classroom, but it was an effective starting point. We occasionally decorated our classroom with our glossary notes, art projects and group brainstorm notes in order to make the room feel more intimate. I cannot say what kind of effect this had on our learning, but I do know that our room looked different from most classrooms, and hopefully, was a little more inviting and personal.

Toward the beginning of the class, we decided as a group to place the power of student evaluation with each student themselves to see what would happen if students are not forced to do work or attend class. In the post-class survey one student said:

I had heard some comments that ‘it does not matter; it is a two credit class, and it is self graded.’ So what will we do if our education lies in our own hands?

Especially if we have been fed our education for so long without too much choice.
What to do with apathy?

I do not believe that this “apathy” proves the futility or hopelessness in this type of educating. Students are not accustomed to having a sense of responsibility to their teachers or to their classmates, especially if there aren’t grades or other official methods of accountability. While some people did stop coming, most others regularly attended class and did the readings. Because ours was a radically different approach to learning, it was difficult for some to adjust to new methods in an educational culture that rewards rapid consumption of knowledge and so-called “objective” evaluation of production by instructors. When two students came to our class even though they were sick and had skipped all of their other classes, they demonstrated their sense of responsibility to the group. This proves that our class began to shift the learning climate of the university. Once students *do* have power over their own learning and teachers do not have unfair power over them in assigning grades, other motivations for learning become the primary reasons for student participation. In our class, for example, we found that a commitment to learning for its own sake as well as a dedication to the community were alternative sources of motivation. In traditional classrooms, community building between students is not generally made a priority. This stems from, among other things, a lack of value in student knowledge and experience. Also, many students feel powerless to change a classroom format, content or dynamic in traditional classes because they have no voice in the syllabus development process or teaching methods. For students in our class, *Radical Education* was an anomaly among their other educational experiences. We replaced external pressures and forces, such as compulsory attendance, homework, and teacher-assigned grades, to other motivations, such as students’ internal drive to further their own learning and feeling accountable to a larger community.

Process

Recognizing that the first day is one of the most important, how will we choose to begin the class, and set the tone for the rest of the quarter? How will we start to shift from the traditional methods and articulate to the class that we want to develop democratic decision making? There will be barriers to developing and maintaining this throughout the quarter. What will our specific challenges be? What will our challenges be in trying to make space for community and keep a focus on collective processing? Are there ways we can build in time and space for group processing, feedback, and planning? Recognizing that active consent is an essential part of a democratic classroom, how can we remain committed to developing a consensual classroom?

One of the most significant conclusions I have come to in the process of our class is the importance of active consent in the classroom. “You can’t use force to put ideas in people’s heads. Education must be nonviolent” (Horton 41). As I mentioned in my Terminology section, active consent is a key part of direct democracy, where all participants are actively consenting to being a part of the group, have control over decisions that affect them, and have access to resources to make this possible. The simple act of enrolling in a class does not imply that a participant is giving all of her consent for the teacher to keep all the power, deciding what the group will learn, when and how. It is crucial to ground all of my reflections about our process with this idea of active consent.

We began our class by simply stating our different intention of doing things collectively and democratically. Lisa, Marc and I showed an example of working collectively by our previous work together to develop the class. This helped set the tone for our time together. We did not begin the first session by passing out a syllabus, as most teachers do. Instead we tried to have a conversation with the other students. We tried to walk the fine line of expressing our interests and suggestions without dominating the class or imposing structure or content. Trying to offer our resources in a way that did not unfairly dictate the direction of our class proved very difficult, both on the first day, and throughout the rest of the quarter.

In the post class survey, a student shared a bit about her/his process, “I felt much more involved in the learning process of the class because I was involved with every aspect of the class. I felt more responsible to achieve certain goals because we set them together; I was not forced to do anything by a professor, but instead chose to complete a certain amount of requirements.”

I have realized and I think others have too that one of the most basic ideas about democratic education is that having more control over your education means you have a lot more responsibility to help things go well. This is ultimately a good thing, but can be hard to grasp if we aren't sure how to continue. The process of unlearning traditional ways of educating and learning can be long and tedious, because, as hooks says, “transgressing boundaries is frightening” (9). I have realized what a slow and painful process it can be to unlearn all of these ways we've been taught education “should” go. From day one, the majority of the group was resistant to group processing. Students pressed for details, for the rules, to simply jump into discussing the readings. Even when we tried to “front-load” student voices by asking questions about their experiences, students still pushed more for details and a list of readings (Shor). “Many students have not problematized the ways in which traditional schooling has shaped their perceptions of power, learning and identity” (Giroux 170). We are socialized into accepting rules from teachers and never have the space to question them openly or create alternatives. Many of us do not have the most basic skills of functioning in spaces without one authority, where we are all collectively responsible for developing our learning space and teaching one another and have power over how things will be done. Students were at a loss as of what to do or say in our class sometimes and therefore, often remained quiet, afraid of being vulnerable or making a mistake.

The tension between remaining democratic and efficient was a huge challenge for us. This was a source of constant confusion, especially in the first part of the quarter.

I have realized that most students in traditional schools are over-socialized into content (reading materials and lectures) and have trouble leaving space for processing (making decisions together, reflecting on what is working well and what is not.) There is often a sense of urgency around consuming knowledge, instead of taking time to engage deeply with ideas. Saving time to check-in at the beginning of each session and end with time for feedback were important components of our democratic class. We began each day with check-ins to see how people were doing with the class, to get to know each other better and to know what others were dealing with in their lives. The feedback portion at the end of each class gave students a chance to talk about what was or wasn't going well from their perspective and to make suggestions for next time. These practices were indispensable in helping to build trust.

Getting to know one another and beginning to build community was a primary goal of our classroom project. "Engaged pedagogy necessarily values student expression" (hooks 20). We wanted to create a space for students to express themselves openly and talk about their communities and experiences. Our art project during week four, our weekly check-ins, and class fieldtrip were some ways for us to acknowledge the presence of each student and try to build community.

Authority and Hierarchy

I expect participants will look to Marc, Lisa and I for direction, for facilitation and for answers. How can we shift the focus from ourselves as primary leaders and facilitators to the rest of the group, so we may all hold responsibility for the class collectively?

How will we keep our sessions from settling into stagnancy? Will it work to facilitate collectively or will we need one facilitator? Is having a facilitator necessarily hierarchical, or just one more role for students to fill?

Lisa, Marc and I have chosen to not develop a list of readings to impose. We feel this would restrict the class from taking its own course. Instead, we wish to develop the class along the way

with other participants, based on everyone's interests, and therefore, maintain an organic, flexible process. How can we do this when the three of us clearly will have knowledge, background and experience that other participants will not have? How can we offer our resources without dominating the group dynamic? How can we make space for other participants to share their knowledge and resources as well? At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that although the three of us want to create a democratic space, we still have more power over the class because we are necessarily more invested, have been studying the topic for awhile, and have developed a tightly-knit working group. How can we keep dialogue open about this, among the three of us, and within the class? Something the three of us addressed in our planning meetings was that a way teachers and students often construct their authority over others is by using specific language of which not everyone in the class shares the same understanding. How can we shift the focus from a competitive atmosphere to one that strives for mutual understanding and teaching of one another? What are tools to help us accomplish this?

As expected, it was a constant pattern throughout the class for students to look to Lisa, Marc and I for direction. We openly acknowledged this dynamic in our class and brainstormed for ways to solve this. This particular situation is a useful example of the importance of collectively acknowledging issues students perceive in the classroom so we can solve them together. Instead of the responsibility for "fixing" something remaining on the shoulders of only one person, we articulated that it was important for us to all work together to help create the dynamic we wanted.

We tried to maintain constant flexibility with our agendas in order to avoid stagnancy and to maintain a sense of organic intellectual exchange that was determined by the people present. By creating agendas that were open to change, and experimenting with different ways to facilitate discussion, we attempted to escape some of the rigidity that comes with more traditional top-down teaching. This helped us to keep lines of communication open and change what wasn't working for the class. We also made efforts to verbally acknowledge the dynamic of the class, such as when we discussed the imbalance of participation (and subsequently used an activity to help us work past this problem during week five) and acknowledged the low energy level in week nine. Another example of this is when we decided we were tired of learning from

textbooks about theories of radical education and wanted to find examples of local alternative educational projects.

The questions about resources and power can be summed up in one larger theoretical question, ‘does having information that others do not have necessarily imply domination?’ After this project, I have come to believe that having information that others do not have does *not* necessarily imply hierarchy. It is when people use this information to maintain power over others instead of trying to create mutual understanding and learning that it becomes problematic. One example of this is when we created an on-going visual glossary for words that were new to us and that we wanted to define for the group. Although we did not hang up these papers every single class, I believe this exercise did help to begin the class with the tone that it is important to explain what we mean so that others will understand us, even when we are using really specific language, as well as to encourage students to be honest when they do not understand something. In this way, we attempted to push past the competitive norm of education, where knowledge and success is understood in terms of scarcity. I also think it would have been effective to suggest doing more group projects, in order to help us move past this idea of learning only as an individual, separate from the rest of a learning community.

Practically speaking, it was important to be as transparent as possible with our process and our resources, while encouraging others to do the same, in order to avoid creating a dynamic where people had information but kept it to themselves instead of helping the group. Lisa, Marc and I gave our suggestions about readings and activities to the class. By deciding each week about what direction we wanted to go for the next week, we kept the process organic and flexible. Sometimes we chose to read pieces suggested by Marc, Lisa and I, and other times, we

chose readings suggested by others. We repeatedly returned to this theme of sharing resources without dominating the direction of the class throughout the quarter.

In terms of making more space for ongoing discussion about our dynamics, I think we should have continued having pre-class planning meetings each week. Even though we didn't have facilitators after the sixth week, we still should have held open planning meetings as a space to maintain a high level of student involvement.

Class Environment

What is a safe classroom? How does the conception of "safety" change, based on a student's identities? Does safety mean that all students have space to speak? Does it mean that issues of racism and sexism (for example) are not skirted around? Or is safety really more about developing a nurturing community where conflict is accepted as a tool of learning and growth?

Based off of our reading of bell hooks, we recognize that creating a space where students can express their emotions, personal experiences and essentially, be "whole human beings with complex lives and experiences, rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge," is essential to creating an engaged classroom (hooks 15). How can we nurture an emotional learning environment, especially where students may have never had experience with this kind of classroom before? How can we "emphasize well-being?" (hooks 15). Along with well-being are trust, a sense of community, and a sense of openness to students' creative expression. How will we help to develop these in the classroom?

In thinking about the class environment, it seems important to try to anticipate what students' fears might be. Where will we meet resistance? How can we push against this and encourage students to ask questions, while at the same time, making space for a culture of dissent where students maintain their spirits of resistance?

Because I am hoping for this class to be a space where we do not skirt around issues of oppression and violence, how will we navigate the terrain of talking about these things, while at the same time, maintaining a space where these things are explored, not only intellectually, but also in terms of our lived experiences and identities. For example, because all participants will be members of social groups with varying levels of privilege and oppression, (ie, white women, women of color, sexual minorities, etc.), each participant will have some form of internalized dominance or internalized oppression. Just as in each moment of interacting with others cross-culturally, this means that the dynamic will be affected, based on people's relationships to power and how they may have been socialized. As is usual, students with more privilege tend to speak more. How can we equalize levels of participation? I acknowledge that participation is much broader than simply who speaks and who doesn't, but this is one aspect of the classroom dynamic that is important to observe. I want to make sure there is space to acknowledge our group dynamic.

In thinking about this question, I am reminded by a quote from bell hooks which sums up my belief about safety:

I enter the classroom with the assumption that we must build “community” in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor. Rather than focusing on issues of safety, I think that a feeling of community creates a sense that there is shared commitment and a common good that binds us (hooks 40).

Her idea is useful because it is important to recognize that the classroom should not be a comfortable space, but quite to the contrary, we need to create learning environments that encourage conflict and openness. All students have different definitions of what it means to feel safe, so this should not be our primary focus. Of course, students need to feel safe from violence, in *all* forms, but having a sense of comfort and security should not be on the top of our list of priorities.

Most of the questions about creating a space where students can be “whole beings” and how students may resist can be explored through this idea I have returned to again and again, the “mind/body split” (hooks, 135). Again, this is the idea that students must leave their personal lives at the door and must not engage in emotions. Students are generally not encouraged to be whole people, but instead to compartmentalize and intellectualize their learning. However, I agree with hooks’ response. “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (13). We must begin from a place of caring for students, in all of their complexities, to build an effective and nurturing learning community.

During our course, my understanding deepened regarding the nuanced ways that the “mind/body split” is inherently oppressive and is rooted in oppressive reality. The kinds of behavior that are deemed “appropriate” in classrooms are directly related to which bodies are legitimated in academia. Historically, white, male property-owners have been accepted as those

who belong in academia. Conversely, women, people of color and poor people have systematically been denied access to institutions of higher learning. This shows whose physical bodies have been admitted or rejected. The split between body and mind is also rooted in stereotypical ideas of women and people of color as inherently emotional and irrational beings. Therefore, because whites and men, (groups with astounding unearned institutional privilege,) are viewed as naturally logical and objective, white, male and middle-class norms of behavior are naturalized. This maintains the “mind/body split” which hooks discusses.

When the students entered our classroom, many consciously or unconsciously reflected this mind/body split. “Ours is a dissociative culture—a culture that separates body from mind, body from spirit, feeling from thinking” (Greenspan 21). We do not engage emotionally in the classroom because intellectual learning and knowing is prioritized over other ways of knowing. Many of us have internalized the devaluing of students’ experiences, and act accordingly, checking our identities at the door. For example, in week five, when we discussed oppression and privilege more deeply, most of us were calm and quiet. We were reflecting dominant behavioral norms where excitement is seen as impeding the learning process. Students in our class were hesitant to be their whole selves in the classroom because this is generally not seen as favorable classroom etiquette. Feeling excited, sad or angry (and expressing it) hinders our learning, and it is often argued, disrupts our ability to be “objective” (hooks). When we do talk about oppression in traditional classes, we virtually never have the space to apply these ideas to our own experience.

Creating more space for student experiences and how people felt about the readings and ideas we explored were constant goals of the group. We wanted to challenge the notion that classrooms are not meant to be spaces where people can be themselves, in all of our emotional

and experiential complexity and diversity. Our intention was to interrupt the norm of all people, but certainly, to a greater extent, oppressed groups, checking their identities at the door. We wanted to emphasize the importance, not only of thinking critically about our materials and the ways classrooms are formed, but also to engage with materials on a personal level.

Some methods we used to create space for students' experiences and emotional responses included trying to front load student experiences in week one, explicitly prioritizing emotionality in the classroom in week six trying to support Lucy when she talked about the ways racism affects her during week seven, and using writing exercises to articulate our feelings about the materials throughout the quarter. Additionally, by having students write their personal responses to the readings, we wanted to create a space for theorizing about our own lives, and therefore, produce our own knowledge. This helped us to move toward our goal of collectively producing knowledge as a class.

Our course helped me to realize even more how emotions in the classroom are generally not tolerated or acknowledged, especially when students are speaking about violence or oppression in their personal experience. We are not taught how to nurture an environment where students feel supported to be vulnerable and to relate the information we learn to our own lives. In terms of attempting to create a space where issues of oppression were not ignored, I have realized that this is connected to the mind/body split. When teachers say that the classroom is not an "appropriate" place to talk about our lives and how the academic material relates to us, many times, it can be an excuse to avoid engaging with the deeper elements of oppressive violence. Additionally, many teachers are afraid of conflict and try to avoid it at all costs. On the contrary, however, I believe that if we never have the space to discuss the ideas in relation to ourselves and encourage conflict as an effective learning tool, we are only superficially engaging with the

materials and cannot truly explore issues of oppression and domination in the classroom. The importance of understanding our lived realities and our immediate environment is a central claim in critical and feminist pedagogies. Again, hooks' articulates the harm in curbing emotionality in the classroom. "Whenever emotional responses erupt, many of us believe our academic purpose has been diminished. To me this is really a distorted notion of intellectual practice, since the underlying assumption is that to be truly intellectual we must be cut off from our emotions" (hooks 155). My belief in curbing space for emotionality and honesty in the classroom stems from my background as a feminist scholar. Feminists have popularized the phrase the 'personal is political' which came out of the 1960s; this mantra encourages people to reflect on the ways that our lived experiences are never isolated events, but always inextricably linked to systems of power and oppression.

Results

What will students take from this class? It is important to look at the skills, ideas and questions this class will help form. What knowledge will we produce as a class? How will our experience in the class affect the ways we view academia and social justice activism outside academia? How will our definitions of power, expertise, authority, and even education be challenged? Furthermore, how will we know we have been successful when the class comes to a close? I anticipate that this will spark questions of what "success" is in the university and how we would like to define it for ourselves.

In evaluating our experiment, I have to rethink my ideas of success. Our project was not a closed experiment in the sense of ever being able to display our final results. On the contrary, we will not ever know the extent of the effects this class will have on the participants.

We do know, however, that we have met our goal of creating a space where students could direct our own learning, both in terms of what we would learn and how. There was no teacher present, we chose our readings as we progressed as a class, and we chose our own agendas and classroom guidelines. We personally engaged with issues of democracy, oppression

and activism, through readings, research about local social change organizations and speaking about our personal experiences and challenges. Our class investigated the efficacy of methods within alternative teaching practices. One student reflected on our results in the post-class survey. “I think a lot of people, including myself, confronted our own status quos, our normative modes of learning, and our assumptions about education. This was a big success. I think we struggled with letting go of fears about doing “it” right and engaging personally in a community context. This is a challenge.” As this student says, our class offered a space to rethink “normative” education methods. It was difficult to let go of the ways we have learned things are “supposed” to go, but we took some beginning steps toward challenging normative conceptions of authority, power and knowledge. The readings we used helped us to ask critical questions about classrooms, as well as power and oppression more broadly.

Another student shared ideas about the class results in the survey.

It was really transformative for me to be in a group of wonderful people talking about all the issues that I have wanted to explore for a long time. It was the first time of having that kind of venue for me. Our class challenged me a great deal to rearrange my life and my intellectual trajectory to more accurately reflect my values and where my heart is trying to go in this life. I think being in that class made me a better person, got me to think more deeply about my position in this world and sensitized me more to the experiences of others. This was due not only to our readings, but also being in a little community with our classmates.

This student explains how the class changed their life for the better. All heady theories aside, this response alone made our project worth it for me. I believe our class served as a space for students with dedication to social and economic justice to explore ideas we might not otherwise be allowed to in mainstream academia.

“The broad, vague, hard to answer question: Was it worth it? Yes. What I learned was different than what I thought I'd learn, but the experience taught me about how a lot of the problems you anticipate never materialize, and the ones you are faced with are more original and

complex that you could have anticipated. I feel like this is the case in any situation where you are faced with individuals, not a demographic, or a subculture. It was really good to be challenged every day.”

Overall Goals

There are some overarching questions that drive this project which reflect our overall values and goals. I want to know—what does it feel like to practice education as liberation? What does it look like to create a democratic, anti-authoritarian and feminist learning space? In thinking about the development of this class, as well as social justice organizing (within and outside of academic institutions), I wonder, how can a group of people work to interrupt the pattern of reproducing dominant hierarchies in the classroom? I am especially curious how this works if some or all of the people are members of dominant societal groups. Can these methods of prioritizing student voices actually have the reverse effects than what we intend, and reproduce dominant hierarchies? How do these educational methods play out when they are used in an institution that is primarily white?

As group facilitators specifically, I want to know how we can work toward building the class from an anti-oppression framework. What can we do to interrupt the perpetuation of systems of domination and hierarchy such as racism, classism or sexism?

Pushing more deeply, I am thinking about the irony of attempting to produce a project that critiques and opposes the very system of which it is a part. Can we be successful, even though the rest of our education, in both the past and present, reflects traditional teaching practices? What does it mean to try to practice liberatory education within an institution that perpetuates systematic domination and upholds authoritarianism? In thinking about knowledge and learning more broadly, does having information that others do not have always imply a hierarchy? Is hierarchy always bad? How can knowledge be transferred without imposing domination?

What kinds of constructive feedback will we offer to our allies in the institution about collectively creating democratic and student-focused learning spaces?

Paramount in this process for me are the questions I have about the implications this class, and radical education in general, have for our lives outside of academia. Although these questions are not answerable from our project, these questions are ultimately the direction I want to be looking. How can we transfer our learning to other classrooms where teachers do not agree with the ways we want our education to happen and, even more challenging, spaces outside academia? How will we use what we learn in the groups we are a part of, organizing for social and economic justice? How do we connect our discussions with our overall life experiences?

‘What does it feel like to practice education as liberation?’ I know I am moving closer to developing an answer to this question. I know I felt more engaged and empowered in this class than I ever did in most of my other classes and many others shared the same sentiment. Students

said that they felt that they could be whole beings and offer their experiences and how they relate to our “academic” materials. In democratic spaces, I have learned that our goal is not to reach complete consensus, but to encourage *dissent*, where participants can develop their spirits of resistance. In a way, our intent to create a democratic space was all we needed. I am not saying that being-well intentioned is enough to bring social change, but I do believe that working towards anti-oppressive education is not simply a means to an end, but an end in itself. The process is crucial. By attempting to create a space where we held the collective power to interrupt ‘business as usual’ and to critically analyze our own socialization, we were well on our way to discovering some answers to very difficult questions.

In terms of trying to do things differently in a group where most of the students were part of dominant groups, I have come to two main conclusions. First, we must recognize that when some people’s voices are left out, our learning can never be as rich. The university excludes many groups of people while it over-represents others and this directly affected our own class. There were not many working class people or people of color. This unequal representation, at the university and classroom levels, affects whose voices can be heard, whose knowledge we learn and the ways we can learn. Our ability to be educated will always be hampered by the exclusion of some people’s voices. Secondly, I believe these methods are effective for people who are already struggling to change oppressive hierarchies. I am not yet ready to conclude on their efficacy for students who “identify consciously or unconsciously with the oppressor” but I do find educator Eden Torres’ ideas on this issue especially useful. She claims that Freire’s methods:

are not as successful with those who either consciously or unconsciously identify with the oppressor... There is a difference between those students who enter the classroom already engaged on a daily basis in an active struggle against overlapping forms of oppression and those who see themselves more closely

aligned with mainstream society. The first group is much more likely to see Freire's ideas as a continuation of their daily sociopolitical struggles and developing consciousness. (Torres 76)

As Torres explains, students who already see themselves as part of a social justice movement are more likely to benefit from these methods whereas using these methods with those who identify more with mainstream society is not as useful.

After our project, I am left with questions about what it means to try to make change in a system which does not support that change. What does it mean to try to practice liberatory education within an institution not set up that way? In a larger institution that does not value democracy and does not explicitly support and promote community, it was an extraordinary challenge to try to unlearn our normative ways of behaving in classrooms. Throughout the quarter, we revisited questions about the system: how much can we work within the system to change it? For example, some of us openly expressed a desire for a slower pace for our learning, but we still had to work in the time frame, a ten week quarter, that the university deems best. We began to realize by halfway through the course that two hours once a week for ten weeks was really no time at all to unlearn undemocratic pedagogies, develop an intimate community and effectively delve into difficult readings. Again in week seven, we returned to our question of working within the system, in this case, in the university. We asked "can the changes we want to see in society happen in public education? Does social change happen through education or must we change education first? How useful is it to try to bring change within the system? Is it better to create alternative systems that compete with and eventually surpass the old ones?" In speaking of the "system" which is often a frustratingly vague term, it is hard to envision what this means for practical purposes. Genevera discussed her views about academia and how problematic it can be. The power that academics have to define "knowledge" and to say how/when/where it should

be taught is an immense power that often goes unacknowledged. We did not reach consensus about the issue of whether or not working within the system or outside of it is best, but talked about benefits and drawbacks of both.

How much is one isolated classroom able to undo the *years* of entrenchment in an educational culture which is not democratic, engaging or empowering, and certainly does not encourage building community? Around the time I began to feel pessimistic about the possibility for change, I found a piece by a teacher that reminded me of the value I hold in determination and persistence. He says, “democracies always exist in the midst of contradictory and hegemonic institutions and thus are not totalizing structures” (29). I am not at all prepared to give up on universities as a lost cause. As a class, for example, we agreed that our project was a great example of how it is possible to work within the system to create change. Do I think creating democratic classrooms is enough to change oppressive systemic realities? Not a chance. But I do believe that this is one way change can happen and taking more power over our learning as students can give us necessary skills for engaging critically with our world around us. While I do believe that our class was successful in terms of helping to change the climate of the university, I am not prepared to say that this will be the most effective way to alter the university system itself. There are many problems with the university system and I believe that social change work must come from all sides, at all times. As Nora said, “nothing can be an impossible organizing space as long as we keep our eyes and ears open to learning. Institutions are not lost causes; we are always educating ourselves and each other. We must plant seeds of resistance.”

I am reminded of a final thought shared by a student in the post-class survey. They say that we “need to feel what it would be like to experience non-competitive education, indeed, a

kind of education that needs the help of everyone in the community. This idea is a model for society all by itself.”

Lessons for Social Justice Education Work

Overall, the class strengthened my belief that we are so conditioned to top-down pedagogies, we feel discomfort, confusion and even anger when something differs from that norm. Unlearning these things can be an excruciatingly slow process, but is indeed necessary to develop more engaged, empowered students. Pieces we found invaluable in trying to create a more nurturing and liberatory environment were an explicit focus on community development, addressing our own classroom’s power dynamics, disrupting the mind/body split, and giving students more power over class structure, class topics and self-evaluations. We found constant challenges in maintaining a balance between content and process, making more space for creative engagement and developing skills for working democratically and collectively. Given these lessons, I will now discuss implications and potential directions for future research.

Implications

This project is about more than just a single classroom. Developing democratic, feminist spaces that have a dedication to maintaining communities with reciprocal accountability and challenging oppressive dynamics cannot be fully accomplished in ten weeks by twelve people. This shift away from authoritarian, individualistic and punitive pedagogies, in which whiteness and maleness remain in the center, implies a radical cultural change that is larger than just the university institution. It is through collective struggle and resistance within, and outside of, academic structures that we can continue this process of unlearning hegemonic constructions of “knowledge” and “learning.” Challenging oppressive and hierarchical dynamics in classrooms and in social justice organizing spaces is about redistributing power, equalizing access to

education, and organizing and educating in ways that reflect the kind of society we want to create.

Participatory research is one way in which we have altered the normative tradition of only one person creating knowledge and deciding what is important to study. We have taken action by creating this classroom differently and using the space to practice our skills of working together democratically and to continue conversations about oppression and privilege. This class has served as a reminder about the ways that all research, community organizing, and classrooms have the potential to create space for re-envisioning normative power dynamics.

The University of Washington desperately needs more spaces for students to organize and learn without instructors present such as the ones that CHID has created. This is strongly connected to youth organizing outside academia. Students and young people need support from allies to develop our own leadership, empower ourselves and take action to change oppressive realities in our lives. Educators must be more aware of the effects their pedagogies have on students, especially those of us in oppressed groups, and take steps toward challenging pedagogical practices which keep themselves at the center and students at the margins. We as students must support ourselves and one another to demand accountability from instructors and work to create spaces amongst ourselves to build solidarity.

Directions for Future Research

There are many directions that others or I might take this work. My primary research interest after this project is in exploring the relationship between democratic education in universities to groups organizing for social and economic change. How are these methods different and similar for groups outside of academia? For example, in the future, I would be interested in doing case study analyses of specific organizations such as the People's Institute

Northwest (a branch of the national organization of People's Institute for Survival and Beyond), Seattle Young People's Project and the Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites.²⁰ These are groups in Seattle which prioritize popular education and non-hierarchical styles of organizing and educating around issues of racism and white privilege, among other systems of oppression. Additionally, I am interested to see how these methods can be applied to support groups for survivors of domestic violence. This curiosity is rooted in my work as a community advocate at two Seattle-based organizations for domestic violence survivors, New Beginnings and the Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse. Less specifically, more information is need about ways that social justice organizations and formal educational settings can help one another. In other words, we need to build more relationships between grassroots organizing and activists within academia.

I am also interested in examining public and charter schools which operate with alternative teaching methods. Possible case studies include Albany Free School in New York, and Nova Alternative High School and Puget Sound Community School in Seattle.

Less significant for my own interests, but a critical issue nonetheless, is the gap in research about liberatory education in the math and sciences. There is a deficiency of literature in these areas and this work is sorely needed.

Closing Thoughts

People seemed so frustrated at the end of our quarter together. My first thought is that we failed, because what is the point of making people so frustrated and disempowered, they want to give up? In rethinking this however, I remember that frustration can be a major catalyst for action. When talking to a class member many weeks after the class, I am reminded of one of my original goals for the class—to speak bluntly, I wanted to shake things up! I welcomed frustration and anger. I wanted participants to critically analyze their educational experiences and use our class as a means to show a world of possibilities of how classrooms can look other than the traditional, authoritarian, silencing way most of us have grown up with. In terms of this goal, we have been more than a success! Furthermore, it is necessary to remind myself that what people

²⁰ See References for more information about all groups, organizations and schools in this section.

choose to do with the information we have shared together as a group is not my responsibility. I must let go. I can hope students will use our experiences to push their thinking about democracy and education, about oppression and social change. I am confident that many of them will choose to keep going. This class has more than served its purpose and I will carry the lessons I have learned with me for the rest of my life. Ignorance is bliss... but frustration, if paired with tools and empowerment, can give birth to extraordinary change.

Personal Journal

April 12, 2006

As mentioned in the Introduction, “it’s impossible to organize without educating and being educated by the very process of organizing” (Bell 121). In short, if we want a democratic and just society, we must develop tools and processes for restructuring our systems. We must “dig where we stand” and begin to critically analyze and change our immediate environments (Maguire and Freire).

I believe this project has given students a small outlet, a place to articulate frustration we have with our other educational experiences and to build solidarity. Our project was much bigger than ourselves. We cannot rely on one class to change the whole climate of the university, but while our class is not enough, it is a step in the right direction.

This work has been an attempt to rewrite the discourse of radical pedagogy to include student voices, not just within our own classroom, but in the broad conversation of democratic and feminist pedagogies. Our project has been a struggle to de-center authority, question our accepted ways of being in classrooms and to connect these with larger themes of internalized oppression and dominance. I have hope that our class gave many students a new experience, in collectively developing a course without the constraints of the presence of a professional authority. As “Radical Education” participants, we collectively produced our own knowledge by using the readings as a starting point to discuss our own experiences. We theorized about our lives, thereby adding to the bodies of knowledge around privilege, oppression, democracy and education.

Though I am discouraged about the system of the larger university, I maintain my hope for youth organizing, both within academia and outside it. I agree with Chandra Mohanty's reference to the academy as "one of the few remaining spaces in a rapidly privatized world that offers some semblance of a public arena for dialogue, engagement, and visioning of democracy and justice" (Mohanty 170). It is exactly *because* I maintain faith and hope for classrooms as spaces for liberatory education that I have engaged in this process of envisioning alternative pedagogical realms. Our class gave me hope that it is possible to learn to approach education differently, in a more holistic, compassionate and engaged way.

In closing, I want to return to my original vision. Creating democratic and feminist classrooms is about envisioning the kind of society we want to have, and taking steps, while constantly reflecting on our practice, to create that society. This is my small step in moving toward liberation. As Antonio Machado says, "Caminante, no hay camino. Se hace camino al andar." There is no road, we must make it as we go. We make the road by walking.

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Appendix A: “So You Want a Democratic Classroom...”

Tips for Students Who Want to Start Their Own Student-Led Class

Remember, your frustration with anti-democratic and oppressive classrooms is justified and there are other students who feel similarly to you. You deserve respect and support as a student.

- You will face resistance. Cultural norms and ideas about expertise, authority and democracy do not lead us toward practicing direct democracy or sharing power.
- Classrooms can be different. Although many of us have not experienced classrooms that are rooted in interrupting oppressive power dynamics, it does not mean they do not exist. Constructing classrooms where students have no power is not inevitable, natural or an effective educational style.
- If you want to get credit for developing a student-led class, visit the Comparative History of Ideas program or email them at chid@u.washington.edu. This program has supportive faculty that believe in student empowerment and strive to support students.
- Use department and interest group email list serves to find other students with similar interests.

Tips for Students Who Want to Democratize Their Current Classrooms

If you are in an oppressive and anti-democratic classroom, there are several steps you can take to get support.

- Firstly, talk with other students! Never underestimate the power of commiserating with and supporting each other. It is impossible to know what will come of brief moments of sharing experiences. This can be especially helpful if you can find community with others that share membership in oppressed communities.
- If you feel comfortable doing so, speak with the teacher about your concerns and address both what you find helpful and what is hindering your learning.
- At the very least, you may wish to create study groups with other interested students in the class to try and engage with the material more deeply and/or to create community. Additionally, this may help with classroom dynamics.
- If you feel a teacher is downright disrespectful, abusive or oppressive, take action! Classrooms should be a place for learning, not for alienating or shaming students. Write an email to the department head or to the university ombudsman, for example, who are trained to support students in these kinds of situations.
- We need to hold teachers accountable. We also need to hold them as complex beings and refrain from demonizing them. It is easier to think critically than to act critically. Many of our teachers have never experienced a democratic classroom, like most of us, and lack a vision of an alternative.

Tips for Educators

Remember, questioning the efficacy of your teaching methods is a necessary part of developing your skills as an educator. We, as students, look to you for direction, challenges and support. Though you may feel powerless in the larger university system, you do have the power to help mold the climate of your classroom. You can either remain complicit in the traditional education climate, which silences students and does not empower us, OR you can seek different methods.

If I didn't think there were incredible teachers out there, I wouldn't bother writing tips. As

feminist educator bell hooks says, “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy,” (hooks, 12.) Teachers who are true allies to students are worth investing in, and that is why I want to offer support to those that care.

- You will face resistance, both from students and from faculty. Students may say you are not doing your job or are taking the easy way out. Find support with other colleagues who share your commitments in order to prepare for student resistance.
- Focus on facilitating discussions and do not always lecture! Rarely are teachers taught how to facilitate discussion in a way that balances out participation and challenges students, without dominating discussion.
- For starters, move the chairs in a circle so everyone can look each other in the eye. Start off with going around the room to check-in and have students introduce themselves and say a bit about themselves (for the first class) or to share how they feel about the readings, for example. Prioritize student voices and do not start with handing out a bunch of papers with all your policies on them! Let’s try and get to know each other first. These methods can be modified for larger classes.
- Give your students more credit for their ability to question normative structures and methods. Many of us are aching for opportunities to deeply engage with the materials and each other in a way that applies to our own lives. See what happens if you articulate your expectations, hopes and intentions to build a democratic classroom which prioritizes the voices of students and encourages “wholeness” in the classroom. You may be surprised at how students respond.
- Be okay with silence. New things can emerge from these uncomfortable silences.
- De-center the front of the room.
- You do not need to speak in between each student comment. Let us have a conversation with one another! See what happens when you relinquish some control and let us connect and talk directly with each other without you as a mediator.
- If you really want feedback to improve your classes, do so mid-quarter instead of just at the end. This way, students have an outlet for things that are/are not working well for them when there is still time to change things.
- Create ways to build community within the class.
- Create an email list or discussion board where you do not have access. This can give students an opportunity to be honest with one another without fearing for their grades. This is one way to help develop a process for mutual accountability.
- Look for the root of your doubts about democratic education. What is it you are afraid of? Loss of respect from students? That students will not learn anything if you do not lead them? Locate these fears and give yourself compassion. Then get support wherever you can to work past your fears.
- Be flexible. You do not need to plan out every minute. Your syllabus does not need to have all readings and homework figured out ahead of time. This can be something to do as a class that will not only give students more power, it might help to remove some of the pressure from you as an instructor.
- Question the system of grades. Teachers have power over us as students in assigning grades. Because we are paying for an education, many students cannot afford to risk being on the bad side of a teacher and failing a course.
- Who speaks the most in your class? Is it disproportionately men? White people? Conversely, who is silent? Pay attention to these dynamics that reflect larger systems of racism, sexism,

classism and homophobia. Using class time to reflect on these dynamics can be a useful tool for learning and equalizing participation.

- Learn to be sensitive to oppression in all areas, and disrupt these ‘isms’ whenever you can, though I recognize this is riskier for people of color or other minorities because they run the risk of being accused of acting out of self-interest.
- How are you being held accountable by students for your methods? Is there a way for students to send you anonymous feedback, without risking their grade or feeling safe in the class? It is up to you to create a way for this to happen and for you to encourage students to participate.
- If you ask for feedback and genuinely want it, students will give it! When we come to you with frustrations with your teaching style, please take responsibility to change the situation. It is okay to ask for feedback and suggestions, but please do not place the burden squarely on our shoulders.
- In the words of one student in the class. “Let go of covering everything on the syllabus; include [yourself] as a whole person in the classroom. Engage honestly, not as ‘academics’ but as yourself.” You cannot fairly expect students to be vulnerable or share emotions in the classroom if you don’t first do these things.
- There is support for you. There are many books which offer practical methods for encouraging democracy in educational spaces. See the References section for more information on social justice educating manuals. Additionally, contact those at Practical Pedagogy, a group of students and teachers interested in issues of pedagogy at the University of Washington. (<http://students.washington.edu/pedagogy/>)

Appendix B: Course Outline

Welcome to 'Radical Education and Social Change'!

CHID 496C, Winter 2006

First off, some basic info:

Thursdays 2:30-4:20

Parrington 310

2 credits, C/NC (credit/no credit)

We'll also have weekly planning meetings for those interested and available; time and place to be decided.

We're doing this course through CHID (Comparative History of Ideas), as a focus group. To register, e-mail Kanna, the CHID advisor, at chid@u.washington.edu with the following information:

1. your student number
 2. your full name
 3. SLN of the focus group (in this case 2714)
- (see <http://depts.washington.edu/chid/focusgroups.php> for info on focus groups.)

We will get everyone's e-mail address on a class list - uwrapped@lists.riseup.net.

For now, here's contact info for the 'co-facilitators':

Lisa Chekerylla pumpkintheory@gmail.com

marc maupoux maupouxm@u.washington.edu

Sam Hatzenbeler samanne@u.washington.edu

To make copies of materials for this course, go to the CHID office, Padelford B102, and ask.

Course summary (the full web description is pasted on the back):

This is a student-facilitated course on the ideas and practice of democratic/radical/critical/feminist education (people use a variety of language to talk about these related ideas). We will examine how these ideas and practices connect to our lives - or how they could - both in our classrooms and in the rest of the world.

Three of us (Lisa, Sam and marc) have been meeting during autumn quarter to go over background readings and discuss ideas for the structure and processes of the course. At this point we are thinking it would be useful to spend the first couple of sessions getting to know one another, talking about goals for the course, and setting a flexible schedule for the quarter. We have an annotated bibliography (short summaries of readings we think are relevant) to share as a starting point to pick readings together. We'll post it on the e-mail list.

Some things we might want to think about for week 2. Others will probably be raised during class, maybe we'll decide to focus on a question or two, or go somewhere else entirely, but I (marc) wanted to get these on paper because the three of us have talked about these, and I think they're useful starting places.

- what experiences have I had that have led me to be interested in these ideas?
- what communities am I connected to, and how does this course connect to the rest of my life?
- what am I most interested in learning about in this class? what am I least interested in?
- what readings or other resources do I know of that could be useful to the class?
- what are my goals for myself in this course? for the group?
- how should we deal with the question of who gets credit?
- what can I share about myself that would help others get to know me?
- what can I bring to help decorate the classroom?

Here's the web description for this course:

CHID 496C: Radical Education and Social Change

Peer Facilitators: Lisa Chekerylla, Marc Maupoux, Sam Hatzenbeler

Supervisor: Kanna Hudson, CHID

Critical Pedagogy has been described as a teaching approach which attempts to help students question and challenge domination, and the beliefs and practices that dominate." In other words, it is a theory and practice of helping students achieve critical consciousness. In this tradition the teacher works to lead students to question ideologies and practices considered oppressive (including those at school), and encourage liberatory collective and individual responses to the actual conditions of their own lives.

"Radical Education and Social Change" will be a class planned and run entirely by students with the objective of collectively discovering how to practice education as liberation. The course will meet once a week for two hours to discuss our readings, ideas and experiences. Our course will be an experiment in determining our values in an anti-authoritarian context. We will be learning the theories and literature behind radical education, and putting radical educational traditions into practice while creating new ones.

Our course will include not only theory, non-fiction, and literature, but also projects based on students' creative expression. The work will be large-group discussion based at times. We will also break into small groups for writing and discussion exercises. In addition to our class-based learning, we would like to incorporate fieldtrips outside of the academy to help us better relate our discussions to pedagogies as they function outside of the classroom. Requirements for credit will be determined by the students.

We have suggested work, but our reading schedule, as well as all written work, will be decided by the class itself. Our coursework and schedule will remain as flexible as possible in order to incorporate students perspectives, goals and intentions.

We are considering reading the following work:

- writings by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who writes about engaged living,

- Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator who practiced non-hierarchical education,
- Teaching to Transgress, by bell hooks, writer, teacher and black intellectual who writes about education as the practice of freedom,
- The Long Haul, by Myles Horton, a white Southern labor and anti-racist organizer who formed the Highlander Folk School in 1932 as well as
- We Make The Road By Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change, by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire

Some ideas we would like to explore in the class are:

- What is radical pedagogy and what does it mean for us? What does it look like? Why is it useful?
- What are the theories behind radical pedagogies/education; looking at different forms, such as feminist pedagogies for example.
- How can we apply radical education traditions both within classroom settings and outside of academia?
- How do we connect our discussions with our overall life experiences?
- Lets produce our own bodies of critical knowledge, developing theories on the possibilities of education.

Appendix C: Consent Form

University of Washington**Consent Form****Radical Education and Social Change: An Experiment In Student-Driven Democratic Feminist Education****Investigator**

Sam Hatzenbeler, Women Studies; samane@u.washington.edu, 206 949-4476

Advisors:

Tamara Myers, Education; tmyers@u.washington.edu, 206-323-9055

David Allen, Chair, Women Studies; dgallen@u.washington.edu, 206-543-3112

Investigator's Statement

I am asking you to be part of a research study that is in conjunction with the class, *Radical Education and Social Change*, CHID 496C, during Winter quarter, 2006. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you know more about my intentions in creating this project. Please read the form carefully and ask any questions you have about the purpose of the study, what kinds of information I am seeking, and the possible risks and benefits of the process.

Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to find out what it means to explore different forms of democratic educational environments as we try to experience these in our classroom this quarter.

My senior thesis as a whole is about the process of trying to create an anti-authoritarian feminist learning space. The end product will include a literature review of my background research, methods of the class, and the process/content of the course itself. I will not be using names of participants, but I will discuss what happens in the course, including classroom dynamics, problems that arise, solutions/discoveries we come to collectively, and my own experience.

I will document the process to help those in the future that wish to work toward democratic education. Potentially, I will offer suggestions for the Women Studies Department as well as guidance for future students who wish to create projects such as ours. I have not yet decided whether or not I will focus my suggestions within academia or for those working toward democratic education more broadly.

Procedures

The type of research I am doing is called participant observation, where I am taking part in the environment/experience that I am also analyzing.

How I am collecting my information: Each week, I will take detailed notes regarding the process and content of the class itself, in order to both document the class for others to learn about in the future, and to facilitate my own process of making sense of the literature about liberatory education. After each class, I will follow a self-created standardized recording and reflection process in order to better engage with the concepts and series of events throughout the course. I will use this space to reflect on the analyses and feedback of the group, and how that interacts with the literature I have read.

Additionally, I may request written feedback after the quarter from participants. This is entirely voluntary. The information will be confidential—I will not ask you to identify yourself if you agree to offer written feedback. It may not be anonymous, however, since we are a small group and there is always a chance I will recognize your writing.

Any information from this feedback or participant observation that is made public in my thesis or publications will not be linked to you. I will paraphrase rather than quote and no names or identifying information will be used. Nonetheless, this is a small group, so people may know you participated in the course.

Risk, Stress or Discomfort

Because we will decide as a group which themes and readings we will explore, the process is entirely consensual. However, some of the issues we will explore in this class are sensitive and very personal, such as systematic oppression. This may cause discomfort for participants.

Due to our pre-arranged system for self-evaluation of participation, I do not have any power over any of you in terms of grading or gaining credit for the course.

Other Information

It is important to me that I maintain transparency of my project at all times. If at any time you have questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me directly, or get in touch with my advisor, David Allen. You may remain confidential if you wish by leaving your concerns in David Allen's mailbox. This is located in the Women Studies office of Padelford B110.

If you are interested in seeing the end product, contact me and I would be more than happy to provide it for you.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you are under 18 years of age, you will need your parent's or guardian's consent to be in the study.

Print name _____ Sign name _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Post Class Recording Form

Post-Class Reflection: Self-Created Standardized Recording Form

1. What were the first things you noticed? Who was there? What was the energy level like? How did the room feel?
2. Atmosphere. What were the overall feelings? What were the trends of the class in terms of power, energy, structure, flow, pace, etc?
3. Structure. Facilitators? Roles? Decision-making?
4. Content. What did we talk about? What were the themes? What questions were raised? What seemed to be accepted “truths” and what were the points of contention and controversy?
5. How did the feedback session go? What kinds of issues were raised?
6. How can you connect these issues to the readings you have done?
7. What things came up for you? What was most interesting? Did you have any revelations about connecting with the materials or developing your own ideas?

Appendix E: Catalyst Post-Class Evaluation Survey

CHID 496C: Radical Education and Social Change**Post-Class Evaluation Survey**

This survey is to offer a space for participants to share feedback about their experience in CHID 496C: Radical Education and Social Change. There are two parts to this survey. The first part involves questions with a survey. Please indicate your answers based on the numerical scale. The second part is for written feedback.

Note: I do not expect participants to answer each question. I would prefer you choose several key questions to answer and do so as in depth as possible. I realize there are quite a few questions here. Please choose the ones that speak to you the most and answer them. If you can only finish the scale questions, and nothing else, please do so. I am grateful for whatever feedback people feel they can give.

This survey is voluntary, confidential and anonymous. Any information from this survey that is made public in my thesis or publications will not be linked to you. I will paraphrase rather than quote and no names or identifying information will be used.

Do you consent to taking this survey?

- Yes
 No

Scale Questions

Part One**Scale questions:**

On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate the following based on your experience.

	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Very much	Completely
1. How able did you feel to be a whole person, with thoughts and feelings in the class?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Did this class feel successful to you?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. To what extent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

has your ability to
imagine
democratic
alternatives in
education
improved?

4. To what extent
has your ability to
critically analyze
classrooms
improved?

5. To what extent
has your ability to
critically reflect on
your own
experience
improved?

Not at all A little Somewhat Very much Completely

6. To what extent
have you
developed skills
around democratic
decision making?

7. To what extent
have your
facilitation skills
improved?

8. How much do
you think this class
will benefit you in
your work and
participation
within academia?

9. How much do
you think this class
will benefit you in
your work and
participation in
spheres of your
life outside of
academia?

Part Two

Qualitative Questions:

Please answer the following questions based on your experience in the class.

There are 18 questions. Remember, it's okay to only choose a few to answer!

1) What criteria did you use to decide if we were successful? What 'counts' as success for you?

1a) Given these criteria, which did we most/least achieve?

2.) Did you *feel* differently in this classroom than in more traditional classrooms? How?

3.) What were the strengths of developing the syllabus together? What were the limitations?

4.) What are the benefits to constructing a class collaboratively? What are the drawbacks?

5.) How might our class have been different if we had a professor in the room?

6.) Now, I am differentiating *content*-based discussion (talking about the readings and experiences) and the *process*-based discussion (talking about how we will proceed; ie making decisions collectively about readings, fieldtrips, etc).

How did you experience the process-based discussion? How would you describe it?

7.) Did you perceive any resistance/discomfort/impatience regarding the process-oriented discussion *in yourself*?

8.) Did you perceive any resistance/discomfort/impatience regarding the process-oriented discussion *in others*?

9.) Why do you think the process-oriented discussion went as it did?

10.) What kinds of advice would you offer to our allies in the institution that are invested in creating democratic classrooms? To faculty? Teachers? Other students?

11.) Has the information you have learned this quarter made your life easier? More difficult? In what ways?

12.) Did the class feel safe to you? Why do you think this is, or is not? In your response, please clarify how you are interpreting the word "safe."

13.) Did you feel a sense of community in this class? Why or why not?

14.) If you felt a sense of community, how do you feel it contributed to your learning?

15.) Did you feel this class increased your skills, competencies and willingness to use them?
How?

16.) Do you consider yourself part of an oppressed group?

17.) If you answered yes to Question #16, did you feel there was space for you to talk about the oppression you face?

18.) Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experience?

Thank you for taking this survey! If you have any questions or comments (either regarding this survey or the class itself) or would like a copy of my thesis, please contact me.

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