



Exploring Critical Feminist Pedagogy: Infusing Dialogue, Participation, and Experience in Teaching and Learning

Author(s): Esther Ngan-Ling Chow, Chadwick Fleck, Gang-Hua Fan, Joshua Joseph, Deanna M. Lyter

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ARTICLES

EXPLORING CRITICAL FEMINIST PEDAGOGY: INFUSING DIALOGUE, PARTICIPATION, AND EXPERIENCE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING*

Derived from the intellectual traditions of critical literacy and feminist pedagogies, this paper explores the nature, dynamics, and implications of the Dialogic, Participatory, and Experiential (DPE) approach to teaching and learning. These three dimensions are separated analytically, but are interrelated in theory and practice. They are highly fluid and context-specific, pertaining to a variety of classroom characteristics and institutional settings. Our insights and observations of the teaching and learning process emerged out of the practice and experience of a graduate-level course on focus groups in cross-cultural research in which the DPE approach was used. The specific aims of the paper are to (1) explore the meaning and value of dialogic, participatory, and experiential practices in transforming students from passive knowledge-consumers into empowered knowledge-producers; (2) discuss how this shift provides spaces for the emancipation of both teachers and students; and (3) address the challenges and risks that are encountered in the classroom when experimenting with non-traditional pedagogies.

ESTHER NGAN-LING CHOW
American University

CHADWICK FLECK
American University

GANG-HUA FAN
University of Texas-Austin

JOSHUA JOSEPH
American University

DEANNA M. LYTER
University of Massachusetts

FOR THE PAST TWO DECADES, there has been sustained interest among educators in exploring both critical and feminist pedagogy within women's studies. Paulo Freire's (1970) widely acclaimed book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, advocates critical literacy for the masses that would enable them to achieve critical consciousness, cultural autonomy, and political action. Sharing similar concerns for critique and action, feminist pedagogy places women's standpoints and feminist principles of ethics, car-

ing, and equality at the center of teaching and analysis (Luke and Gore 1992). Both streams of thought emphasize the importance of exploring alternative and innovative ways of teaching and learning about life.

The approach to teaching and learning that we advocate in this paper is based on the dynamics of dialogue, participation, and experience (DPE) that we have identified as essential dimensions (although not necessarily the only ones) in a critical and feminist pedagogic classroom. While the DPE ap-

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for the reporting and analysis of their involvement in the focus group class in this paper. Please address all correspondence to the Esther Ngan-Ling Chow, Department of Sociology American University, 4400 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20016-8072; e-mail: echow@american.edu.

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proach to teaching and learning originated from one author's cumulative teaching experiences, this paper developed out of a graduate-level course on focus groups in cross-cultural research in which the DPE approach was used and has since been further refined (Chow 2000). This paper reflects the collective observations and insights of both the teacher and student learners involved.

In this paper we aim to: (1) explore the meaning and value of dialogic, participatory, and experiential practices in transforming students from passive knowledge-consumers into empowered knowledge-producers; (2) discuss how this shift provides spaces for the emancipation and empowerment of both teachers and students; and (3) address the challenges and risks encountered in the classroom when experimenting with non-traditional pedagogies.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The Dialogic, Participatory, and Experiential (DPE) Approach is well-grounded in the two major liberatory frameworks, critical and feminist pedagogy, that seek to challenge systems of domination, question social construction of knowledge and power, generate consciousness and critical thinking, and to promote social change. Broadly speaking, the critical element in pedagogy is as old as civilization, practiced by Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato in the West and by Chinese Confucianism and other gurus in the East. In the West, critical pedagogy's sources lie in critical thinking that can be traced as far back as the seventeenth century with Rene Descartes' science of skepticism and extend to modern times with Gramsci's (1971) critical theories, Paulo Freire's (1970, 1985) critical literacy and popular education, and Giroux's (1983) emancipatory rationality and citizenship education. The inspirational work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1970), is particularly relevant here, for he began a literacy movement to liberate the

oppressed—powerless, poor adults—who were encouraged to dialogue and think critically about their daily life experiences. His liberating education is founded on the values of equality and freedom, uplifting the oppressed from a “culture of silence” and raising their critical conscience for social action.

Feminist pedagogy has much in common with critical pedagogy and has frequently interacted and conversed with the work of Paulo Freire. The distinguishing factor is feminist thinking's emphasis on using a gendered lens to examine social constructions of masculinity and femininity as forming a central stratifying cleavage within society. Luke (1992) points out that critical theorists in education place little emphasis on women learners' interests or on women's critiques and actions in public and private life. Central themes of a general feminist pedagogy underpinning the DPE approach to teaching are: (1) an understanding that sees women as knowers; (2) concerns with equality and power among learners and teachers and between teachers and the administration; (3) the formation of community within the classroom; (4) an emphasis on consciousness raising, diversity, and justice; and (5) concerns with caring and empowerment (Chow 2000; Fisher 2001; Freeman and Schmidt 2000; hooks 1994; Luke and Gore 1992). By making space for these themes in the classroom community, it is possible to challenge constructions of traditional knowledge and relationships that are often muted by the educational institution and within the larger society. As a result of this challenge, teachers and learners can more readily disrupt traditional understandings, question power relationships, reenvision knowledge, and further their own empowerment.

Derived from the literature of critical and feminist pedagogy, we have identified dialogic, participatory, and experiential components as key dimensions of classroom teaching and learning. We readily acknowledge that we are still in the process of understanding and clarifying what is essential

about these dimensions. With this in mind, our definitions of the three dimensions are working definitions based on critical pedagogy and feminist theories. The ideas presented here are continually evolving.

The dialogic, participatory, and experiential components are present—to a greater or lesser degree—in all learning environments. The presence of each dimension can be viewed along a continuum moving from low to high. For example, at the low end of the participatory continuum, students may be given few opportunities to take part in classroom learning beyond listening to lectures and taking notes. Moving toward the high end, students may have increased opportunities to actively shape the focus of the class, including its organization, content, and presentation of materials.

Although the three DPE dimensions are discussed separately here for purposes of conceptual and theoretical formulation, we see them as being interrelated rather than wholly independent. In addition, we believe that none of the dimensions can be understood apart from the broader learning environments in which they occur. Characteristics of the learning environment that affect how dialogue, participation, and experience can be utilized in the classroom include teaching style, course curriculum, learner/teacher dynamics, the institutional environment, and culture. Because of the variety of conditions that shape learning environments, we should note that the elements of DPE are non-hierarchical and fluid. In other words, any one of the dimensions can be used as a point of entry in creating a classroom that is guided by DPE. We conceptualize DPE as a teaching tool that capitalizes on the strengths of the dialogic, participatory, and experiential dimensions while remaining flexible enough to accommodate a variety of teaching and learning styles in different learning environments. We hope that by providing examples and suggesting ways to implement the DPE approach, the discussion that follows will be engaging theoretically and useful in practice.

The Dialogic Dimension

In the communicative perspective advocated by both Freire (1970) and Habermas (1984), knowledge and theory are constructed through dialogue. Dialogue refers to the fundamental ways in which students and teachers communicate and interact in the classroom by using language (verbal and nonverbal), symbol, and image. Effective dialogue can enable social and intellectual exchanges by creating shared spaces and mutual understanding among learners and between learners and teachers. Consequently, it can be a sensitizing, reciprocal process that acknowledges the significance of others in interaction. For teachers, dialogue can be a means to raise consciousness, to engage students, and to draw their perspectives, experiences, and critical thinking more fully into the subject matter of the class. For learners, dialogue can be effective in heightening awareness of social issues and increasing the relevance of information. By collectively voicing their views, interests, and concerns, students may recognize the value of one's own knowledge as well as that of others'.

Dialogue goes beyond speaking and giving information to others. A central goal is to be open to multiple viewpoints through communication and interaction. As such, effective dialogue requires an environment where participants are open and willing to listen reflectively to alternative views. It recognizes that teachers and learners share responsibility for effective communication and openness. To better understand what others actually mean rather than simply what they say, both parties must be willing to accept challenges to their ideas, to suspend judgment when needed, and to validate the views of others. At times, effective dialogue may require being open to uncomfortable ideas and opposing viewpoints. Despite such barriers, dialogue has helped to make the teaching and learning processes more constructive, active, and reflexive.

Dialogue can encourage partnership building between teachers and learners, so that the traditional roles of each may be-

come less static. At appropriate times, the teacher may learn and the learners may teach. For example, in the course of dialogue, a student may take on the role of a teacher by sharing his or her personal knowledge and experience, adding greater breadth and depth to the class's academic concepts and texts. In turn, by encouraging such dialogue and valuing the students' knowledge, teachers may place themselves among the learners in the classroom. Dialogue has the potential to enrich the ways in which students relate to each other and to the teacher. This interaction can foster a greater sense of community among learners and teachers within and outside the classroom. By recognizing the potential of dialogue, teachers and learners can take greater ownership of the teaching and learning process.

The Participatory Dimension

Participation refers to student involvement in the learning process (both within and outside of the classroom) and also to the empowerment of learners and teachers. A participatory process opens the door for students to influence the process of teaching and learning and to engage with subjects in a variety of ways that are meaningful and interesting to them. Ultimately, an active participatory approach can give learners greater opportunities to recognize their own potential for growth.

Ideally, a participatory classroom returns the focus of learning to the student (Reinharz 1992; Tandon 1988). The interests, experiences, and knowledge of the students are legitimized and incorporated into the teaching and learning processes. Rather than relying on teachers to disseminate information in a hierarchical fashion, students of diverse backgrounds (for example, gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, nationality, culture, physical abilities, and so on) in partnership with the teacher, are encouraged to share their knowledge and insights, to shape classroom activities and assignments, and to assume leadership roles. Consequently, the respon-

sibility of establishing an effective learning environment is partially shifted from the teacher's shoulders to those of the students—a shift that can be an empowering process for both teacher and learners. As with dialogue, teachers may be empowered to broaden their own perspectives by learning from students, thereby enriching the pedagogic scope and content of the teaching process. In this way, the classroom becomes a democratic environment characterized by joint decision-making and collective learning.

Hands-on or interactive learning methods are also a distinctive aspect of participatory classrooms, which may include group or individual projects, field trips, and community or service-learning projects. Various types of activities or events may be used inside and outside of the classroom to maintain the interest of both learners and teachers and to offer multiple opportunities for both parties to participate in ways that they recognize as meaningful and challenging. Through active forms of participation, students may begin to recognize the potential benefits of collective action outside of the classroom and to apply this learning in the context of their community or professional work to pursue positive social change. Students are able to take ownership of the learning process when they are given greater opportunities to shape the planning, content, organization, and process of the class. This ownership arises from two equally necessary conditions: the teacher's willingness to provide such opportunities in the classroom and the students' ability to see more broadly the meaning and relevance of learning beyond their examination scores and grades.

The Experiential Dimension

Freire (1998) asserts that when knowledge is socially constructed in a communitarian praxis, meaning that the classroom is a community of learners, students should be involved in a discussion of the logic behind various forms of knowledge including their experiences. The experiential dimension

seeks to bridge a gap between students' (and teachers') life experiences and learning experiences within academia. Much like scholarly knowledge, personal experience can be a valid and valuable source of knowing, and is similar to the concept of empowerment from within suggested by Townsend et al. (1999). In order for students to situate and see the applicability of class materials, concepts, and theories, they often need to connect these stimuli to their own lives and to those of others. Creating opportunities for learning to become highly personal can therefore potentially broaden each student's perspective and serve as a testing ground to validate or invalidate his/her understanding.

Standpoint theory (Haraway 1988; Hartstock 1983; Smith 1987) is highly relevant to the experiential dimension. The theory is rooted in the assumption that there is not one Truth based on universal laws, but various truths embedded in multiple, perhaps contradictory, points of view or experiences. Haraway (1988) argues that all knowledge is situated and that different standpoints, as the basis of knowledge, reflect different life experiences of an individual in specific social locations. In particular, these feminist theorists advocate using women's standpoints, often omitted or hidden in mainstream discourse, as the center from which we conduct analysis. Similarly, teaching and learning processes are highly gendered, which means that the understandings and experiences of teachers and students differ between women and men. This gendered experience is often compounded by race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, nationality, culture, and other relevant dimensions attributable to a multiplicity of experiences, voices, and worldviews. Thus, so-called truth is inherently relative and partial rather than absolute, making diverse experiences a potential asset in learning and understanding.

The experiential dimension of DPE allows teachers to enrich the learning environment by tapping into what bell hooks (1994) calls the "passion of experience"—the unique personal experiences that each learner

brings to the classroom. For example, bell hooks has noted that revealing personal experiences of racism, sexual discrimination, and class inequalities may add a deeper dimension to text-based and theoretically-based analyses of stratification and inequality. These "lived" experiences have power and complexity that link learning inside of the classroom with learning outside school walls. This can lead to the merging of multiple points of experience through critical and reflexive thinking to create a richer and more grounded body of knowledge. At times, some points of experience may conflict, which would require students to use their critical thinking to filter through their various lenses for a more refined comprehension. The revelations that come from sharing experiences can also be important for other reasons. As Gorelick (1996: 388) observes, "much of the underlying structure of oppression is hidden, not only by means of ideology but also by means of contradictory daily life."

Through experience, a richer and more complex pool of knowledge is integrated and valued in the classroom. Teachers and students build on lived experiences to enrich the learning environment, sparking both to make new connections and draw original insights. Ideally, learners and teachers come to recognize the limitations of their own worldviews and respect the value and authenticity that those with different views bring to the learning process.

PRACTICING THE DPE APPROACH IN THE CLASSROOM

What does the DPE approach look like in the classroom and why do we think it can be effective? Beyond the basic knowledge and skills that are transmitted from teacher to students, the learning process is enriched by a communicative, interactive, learner-centered, discussion-oriented, and experientially-based approach to teaching. The remaining two sections outline and reflect upon our own experiences using the DPE approach in a focus group class that we took

together and address both the benefits and challenges we faced. Our observations are also supplemented by comments from other students' journals, group research reports, and remarks in class as well as in debriefing sessions to provide evidence of their enhanced learning. In this way, we hope to leave the reader with a clear understanding of at least one way in which the DPE approach can be applied and further explored.

In the spring semester of 1998, a diverse group of 14 graduate students at American University participated in a one-credit, three-week course on focus group methods in cross-cultural research.¹ The main goal of the course was to introduce students to the theory and practice of focus group research with an emphasis on cross-cultural understanding. Formally, we accomplished this goal through reading two introductory texts on focus groups, conducting two focus groups, and completing related research tasks and reports. As already noted, students also kept journals in which they recorded their experiences, observations, and insights from the class. By using the DPE approach, we also were able to create a rich environment for critical and feminist thought and action, resulting in an intellectually and socially transformative experience for many of the people involved.

A key challenge of the course was fitting the DPE process to a truncated class schedule. Given our optimistic goal of conducting two focus group sessions within the three-week period, teacher and students had to begin working together very quickly and efficiently. During the first class, we had much to do. We students had to get acquainted, choose a suitable focus group topic, and assign roles and responsibilities among ourselves for conducting the focus groups. In short, the structure of the class made collaboration a necessity for achieving our goals. If we had been unable to work together and depend on each other to carry out the various tasks required, we would

¹The class met for a block of four hours each week over the three-week course period: a total of 12 hours of classroom time.

not have been able to organize and run the focus groups.

Fostering a collaborative environment was the teacher's most immediate challenge as the course began. For the DPE approach to work, one important step is to modify teacher and student roles by placing the learners on center stage as partners in the teaching and learning process. After our teacher introduced the topic of focus group research and presented her ideas for what the class could accomplish, she involved students through dialogue to select a discussion topic for the upcoming focus groups.

While this dialogic approach was ultimately effective, there were some early difficulties in our class. An initial obstacle to dialogue was that both students and teacher came to class with societal and normative expectations about how the other should behave. For example, many students felt uncomfortable when our teacher decentralized power and delegated authority to the learners by taking on the role of facilitator instead of leader. Whether it was discomfort with the teacher's less conventional role, unfamiliarity with the task at hand, or other reasons, these students seemed reluctant to take part in the discussion to plan the focus groups. One student observed that "the group dynamics had taken a dramatic shift and it was evident that the class was being driven by the agenda of only a select few." As this example shows, providing more opportunity for dialogue does not guarantee equitable student participation or ensure positive responses to the DPE approach. However, the initial frustrations in our class and the students' responses to them are instructive. After that first class, some students approached the teacher to express frustration with the class discussion and with the imbalanced decision-making process that followed. Their action indicates students' critical abilities to assess the learning situation, their willingness to reflect on their classroom experiences, and their desire to make improvements, leading to active participation in the learning process.

What are the origins of some of the stu-

dents' negative reactions? Shor and Freire (1987) suggest that, from an early age, students in teacher-centered classrooms can learn to be passive participants in their own education. They may come to view the teacher as the classroom leader and source of knowledge. Burbules (1986) further argues that passivity is one of several lessons in education's "hidden curriculum." In many traditional approaches to schooling, students are implicitly taught to be reserved in their learning and, by extension, to accept and perpetuate the status quo. In our class, students' past educational conditioning may have worked against the goal of creating a feminist classroom where (1) collaboration—rather than an individualistic approach—was expected and (2) interdependency—rather than hierarchy—was the frame for evaluating the community's performance.

In our class, the willingness of students to approach the teacher (albeit in private after class) to discuss their concerns and uncertainties allowed our teacher to better address their specific needs. In the remaining two classes, our teacher was able to facilitate the transition to a more egalitarian classroom community by using small group dynamics and practicing feminist principles as alternative techniques. For example, the teacher developed a slogan called TRUE PALS, an acronym for Teamwork, Respect for one another, Understanding, Equity, Politeness/Courtesy, Awareness/Sensitivity, Leadership, and Sharing. As a group, we reminded ourselves of the importance of being true pals in participatory mobilization, task coordination, team building, and sharing, so that we could benefit from active learning, collaborative research, and collective action. As a consequence, one initially frustrated student noted, "I firmly believe that the negative experience gave way to a positive outcome."

In addition, our teacher used the feminist principles of ethics, caring, and equality to strive for a democratic process in which student learners played a large and cooperative role in team-building and decision-

making. The techniques included sensitizing discussions that covered the basics of focus group research, setting short-term goals that called for teamwork and cooperation, hands-on activities that centered around small groups, equity in task assignments that addressed diversity, around-the-room debriefings after each focus group that involved all students, and a requirement of working on a group research report.

By working together in smaller groups, the teacher and students were able to contribute collectively to a variety of tasks and simultaneously share different perspectives. These included designing the focus group protocol, filling out the human subjects protection form, recruiting research participants, making reservations for the research laboratory, setting up the equipment, preparing the reception area, and doing clean-up jobs. Such structured activities brought greater balance to classroom participation by providing windows of opportunity for quieter students to contribute and more dominant students to listen.² We believe these activities were both effective and essential to the learning and community-building experience. Comments drawn from two student journals strongly support this view. For example, one student observed, "The opportunity to talk with [other students] was valuable because I learned their point of view, learned their perspective." Another student reflected that "teamwork is very important for a success of a focus group research. I learned this not just from the training...but from the whole process of the class." Though we did not eliminate disagreements entirely, the energy we invested in cooperating as a community tended to reduce frustration and diffuse tensions among class members. As noted previously, we valued multiple realities and

²In the process of stressing the importance of having women give voice, we found that the intersection of gender, race, and nationality tended to silence some students. An effort was made to encourage these students to take on important and visible roles in various class activities.

analyses rather than defaulting to majority opinions. We were generally able to learn from differences in classmates' perspectives and negotiate mutual agreement.

In keeping with the experiential element of DPE, our teacher created opportunities for students to work together in diverse groups as a way to value their unique standpoints and experiences. When the class was divided into small groups, we tried to ensure that the groups, while mostly self-selected, were gender-balanced and culturally mixed with international and American students. The goal was to encourage fair representation and opportunities for equal participation among students within these groups. Similarly, we applied DPE principles to recruiting focus group participants and designing and moderating the focus groups. We decided to run separate focus groups for women and men to control for male dominance in gendered communication (Tannen 1996). When recruiting for each gender group, we also took race, ethnicity, nationality, and cultural background into consideration. Each focus group was co-moderated by two students who matched the gender and international backgrounds of its participants. The DPE approach also accommodated both personality and cultural differences, which contributed to student preferences for being either behind the scenes or directly on stage during the first focus group. During the second focus group, students had an opportunity to reverse their preferences so that those who were behind the scenes initially could be on stage or vice versa.

As discussed previously, one of the foundations of our class rested on its participatory approach—in research and in other classroom activities. Participatory research seeks to break down the barriers between the researcher and subject and to challenge the view that researchers are inherently more knowledgeable and insightful than the subjects being interviewed and studied (Guba and Lincoln 1989; Heron 1996; Reason 1988). Standpoint feminism takes up this challenge by placing women and other

disempowered groups that are sources of knowledge at the center of analysis (Gorelick 1996; Reinhartz 1992; Smith 1987). Rather than privileging the theoretical knowledge of the researcher, this form of research seeks both to give voice and to incorporate the participants' knowledge and experience into the design and implementation of the research. A comment in one student journal readily summed up the experience, "I firmly believe that this is an effective way to give voice to every student. It affords us all an opportunity to share our respective academic interests, as well as learning about each other's ethnic and cultural backgrounds."

When applied to the classroom, a central goal of participation is to create an environment where students actively participate in the production of knowledge. This approach challenges the traditional hierarchy of teacher-student relationships and a teacher-centered source of knowledge. Ideally, a participatory approach to classroom learning is grounded in the concerns and issues identified by all participants—teachers as well as learners. Therefore, it is often appropriate for teachers to solicit input on issues that are important to students and to make these issues an integral part of the course content. In their journals, several students commented positively on this aspect of the class by acknowledging giving voice as a rewarding experience.

In our class, students participated in many ways. The most direct were by conceptualizing, designing, and conducting the focus groups.³ Learning by doing is a very different experience than learning through lecture, readings, and discussions. It allows the learner to interact with others in the learning process and to take intellectual ownership of the form and outcome of the process. The design of our class permitted learners to choose which tasks they would be responsible for, so that each person could participate at a level that was com-

³The two focus groups were both video and audio-taped for group discussion, analysis, and writing.

fortable for him or her. As one student observed, "the active participation and learning environment fosters students to put into practice what they have learned." The feeling of success is palpable in a comment from one group's final research report:

By using the DPE approach we were able to learn the skills of conducting a focus group first hand by applying our learning directly to the project. This method is a concrete manner in which to acquire skills for future use. In addition, this method provided us with real-life situations and problems that may occur while conducting a focus group. This style of learning provides the student with knowledge of the process that they would not have been able to gain without actually participating.

Because students helped to drive the course work, the teaching process and the learning were often more rewarding than in a conventional classroom. As we became more aware of how collaborative approaches to teaching and learning could enrich our educational experience, we became *knowledge-producers* as well as *knowledge-consumers*. For example, we noticed in our initial discussions how students made frequent references to focus group authorities from class readings (Krueger 1994) to substantiate or justify their own observations and thoughts. However, we soon developed an understanding of focus group research that was based on participation, observation, and personal experiences in conjunction with the information supplied by our formal texts. One student expressed views similar to many in commenting, "What I learned from this [one-credit class] is more than in other three-credit classes....During the three weeks [of the course], we actually ran two focus groups and learned from the actual experience of doing it. I think this is the biggest advantage of this class." Another student had the opportunity to be asked by his boss to serve as the second moderator for a series of focus groups in the field the day following the last class. In recalling the experience of transforming from a knowl-

edge-consumer to a knowledge-producer, he remarked, "The experience is great. It supported and reinforced what we had been learning in class. I felt confident in my role...and gained additional confidence seeing various techniques work with groups of people that I didn't know." This re-appropriation of knowledge was a liberating event for both students and teacher.

As discussed above, our class provided students with the opportunity to determine the topic of the focus group research and to choose our own roles in its implementation. However, it is important to note that the course was geared toward a particular type of participation. Our main goal was to learn, in a hands-on way, how to conduct focus groups. The social issues we explored during the two focus groups were important but secondary to this main goal. Because the course was primarily skill- rather than issue-oriented, this affected the ways in which students participated in the class and the range of issues about which their input was solicited. When more complex social issues are the focus of a course, the ways in which students participate can be changed accordingly. For example, the regular sharing of learners' experiences relating to key issues may become central to the course content, whereas the need for hands-on participation may be reduced.⁴

We should also note that the three-week duration of our course created time pressures that both helped and limited the DPE approach. On one hand, we have already noted how immediate reliance and trust among students was necessary for our focus groups to succeed. On the other hand, these same pressures also forced us to limit greater student discussion and involvement on key tasks, which led to initial frustra-

⁴For example, in other issue-oriented courses in which the DPE approach was used successfully, students participated in deciding the focus of the class discussion, selecting video-taped materials that best illustrated basic concepts and key issues from the assigned readings, and in suggesting questions to lead class discussions themselves.

tions among some students. There is reason to believe that the DPE approach could be even more successful in full-semester courses where there is time to establish the sharing relationships and collaborative spirit needed among learners and the teacher.⁵

Another aspect of our experience with DPE in the classroom involved peer teaching. Peer teaching is a departure from typical hierarchical teaching in the sense that students learn not only from the teacher and from academic texts, but also from the comments, insights, and experiences of other students. Opportunities to enrich student learning by the sharing of insights and experiences with fellow students tend to take place less frequently in lecture-centered classes. In our case, open dialogue, discussion, and shared experiences helped students to put knowledge from the course readings and focus group activities into new contexts. As one student observed, students in the class "had different perspectives based on their roles...no single person can possibly catch everything that goes on in a focus group, so it is helpful to have research collaborators." The use of peer teaching gave us a chance to see how the experiences of our classmates could add to our own understanding and overall educational experiences.

Through the combination of dialogue, participation, and experience, the academic process of teaching and learning in our classroom became less rigid and more accessible. Working as a team toward a common goal, we developed personal knowledge that reached beyond our formal texts. The debriefing session at the end of each class offered an open, intellectual space to

⁵After offering the focus group course, the DPE approach was used for six three-credit courses—four issue-oriented courses and two seminar courses at graduate and undergraduate levels, including both required and elective ones—which further refined the theoretical as well as practical utilities of this approach. Except for one instance, these courses received equally high or even higher teaching evaluations than the focus group course.

permit knowledge, learned skills, experiences, and insights or hindsights to be shared, critiqued, and integrated into the learning process. Numerous students supported one another and benefited from learning collaboratively and from comparing research experiences. Constructive comments were made and many were transformed into positive suggestions for modifying subsequent class activities and discussion.⁶ In this sense, our experience in the course was liberating. By infusing feminist pedagogy with Freire's views of liberating education, we were able to challenge tradition and take greater ownership of learning in our class.

Several students even included observations in their journals that suggested that the class had a broader impact. As mentioned earlier, one student was able to apply his enhanced learning experience from the focus group to the workplace. Another student contrasted his high level of engagement in our DPE-driven class with his experience in a traditionally-taught focus group course, which he subsequently took in another major university. In the latter, the discussion topic, protocol, questionnaire of demographic information, and letter of consent were provided by the instructor and students simply ran the focus group according to protocol. He summarized the comparison below:

...students in the class taught by the DPE pedagogy learned more than that taught traditionally....Students in the DPE class were more active in learning and using their imagi-

⁶For a full semester course, debriefing sessions can be translated into interim teaching evaluations to solicit informally students' comments and suggestions from which course improvements are made.

⁷The two focus group courses were comparable in terms of course content, being graduate level, having a similar time frame, being led by a female professor, and having students from mixed backgrounds. The main difference is the teaching approach—traditional didactic vs. DPE approaches. The quotation was obtained via e-mail.

nation (about how to construct "real" research). The dialogue process gives every student a better understanding of the conceptualization and operationalization of research topics and a better sense of being a knowledge producer...the students' whole journey of participation allowed them to apply what they learned in class and through which they found out challenges and problems with this research method. The ability to solve problems is critical for a knowledge producer.

In much of this article we have addressed the quality and benefits of our class discussions, participatory activities, and other shared experiences relating to DPE. However, we recognize that the use of the DPE approach may not always lead to productive or effective learning experiences. We discuss additional challenges and risks of the DPE approach in more detail in the following section.

THE REALITIES AND CHALLENGES OF DPE

Critical feminist pedagogy is a promising alternative to traditional modes of teaching and learning. Ideally, the DPE approach to pedagogy facilitates emancipation, equality, and empowerment. As discussed, we were able to utilize this approach in a way that suited our needs and provided us with a rewarding teaching and learning experience. But is DPE for everyone?

One basic assumption we make in proposing DPE to readers is that both teachers and learners are open and willing to engage in a non-traditional pedagogy. Inertia from conventional approaches to teaching and learning can shape teachers' and learners' expectations in ways that hinder such engagement. Teachers may be unwilling or unable to imagine alternative ways of teaching, and students may resist new and unfamiliar learning approaches. In addition, challenging traditional and familiar approaches to classroom teaching and learning can involve risks, including institutional pressures on teachers, student discomfort and resistance to change, and more. The DPE approach,

then, should only be considered an alternative for teachers and students who are willing to be somewhat unconventional and who recognize the potential risks involved.

Central to the DPE approach is the idea that three key dimensions for learning—dialogue, participation, and experience—exist in some degree in every classroom. Each dimension can be tailored to complement the students, course curriculum, and instructional materials, which makes the approach dynamic and responsive. In any classroom, the gender, class, age, ethnic and racial makeup, cultural mix, and sexual orientation of students and teacher can impact classroom dynamics and behaviors as well as the teachers' expectations of students and methods for eliciting and encouraging dialogue. The challenge facing teachers and learners alike is to harness the three dimensions effectively and appropriately as tools for learning.

Course characteristics such as content, size, level, and requirements affect the utility of the DPE approach because they differentially impact the input, process, and outcomes of both learning and teaching. Generally speaking, our teacher has had better success in using DPE in graduate or senior seminars, training modules, and research methods courses, with small- or medium-sized classes that are mostly required for majors or minors in sociology.⁸ Graduate-level courses with conscientious students who are motivated by intellectual zeal are usually more successful than undergraduate courses. Upper-division undergraduate courses usually fare better than general education courses, which often attract many first-year college students who expect a

⁸On the whole, at our university faculty members tend to have lower teaching evaluations in general education than other courses, but higher teaching evaluations in graduate than undergraduate courses. A large-sized general education course with half of the class freshmen in which the DPE was used received average teaching evaluations. The value of practicing the DPE in large size classes needs further exploration.

traditional mode of instruction. Required courses also tend to elicit students' cooperative efforts more readily than elective ones. Issue-oriented courses gradually received better teaching evaluations and outcomes when the DPE approach had been further refined by making more class activities learner-centered, student-led, and interactive and by using a variety of teaching formats and techniques. Improved use of the DPE over time has increased the proficiency and effectiveness of the teacher. Yet even in different iterations of the same course, the effectiveness of DPE will be shaped by the composition of the students, the teaching assistant, and the conditions of both teaching and learning.⁹ Increasingly our teacher even found that the timing of undergraduate classes influences the manner in which students participate in class activities (for instance, students participated more in late morning than early morning classes). Additional interactive exercises and various teaching formats (for example, role-playing, debating, guest speakers, video-tapes/films, slide shows, body stretches, the working for change game or musical chairs exercises) which require students to do critical thinking and to move around to get things accomplished in the classroom are used to supplement lecture and class discussion. In accomodating these constraints and challenges, DPE should be viewed as a flexible approach that can be tailored to suit the specific needs of different classroom environments with varied student backgrounds and composition.

When encouraging dialogue and interaction, there is always a danger that some students will either not be actively engaged or will dominate the learning process,

⁹Having a full teaching load of three courses in certain semesters inadvertently affected the ability of the teacher to devote a consistent level of effort to all courses. The presence of a part-time teaching assistant (i.e., working 10 hours or less per week) in a few courses was less effective since they neither devoted much time to teaching nor paid enough attention to the application of the DPE approach.

which can disrupt the team effort. As Ira Shor (1992:93) writes, "Unfortunately, the effects of nondialogic classrooms spill over into participatory ones. Even when students trust the good intentions of a dialogic teacher who listens to them, many have already learned in traditional classes that a good student keeps quiet and agrees with the teacher." Similarly, the converse example from our own class, where a few dominant students initially sidetracked the learning process, can be equally damaging. Deborah Tannen (1998), a sociolinguist, explains that universities have become hotbeds of "unproductive argument," because many students have learned that disagreeing with authority is a way to prove their knowledge and to win teachers' respect. In an argument culture, she explains, people often enter a debate not in search of truths but in search of status. In this case, dialogue is not to express, but to impress. Dialogue for the sake of conversing without substance is equally detrimental to learning. In such instances, the teacher may become responsible for damage control, hoping that students will come to each other's rescue.

Subscribing to the notion of credentialism, students understand that society often measures their intelligence and their potential by school grades and diplomas. Encouraging dialogue and participation in the classroom can upset students' understanding of how the educational system works. For instance, some students who are accustomed to traditional modes of instruction may be either skeptical of or ambivalent about free style and peer teaching, showing uneasiness in or even resistance to adapting to an unconventional classroom approach.¹⁰ After years of schooling and experience with traditional group projects, students can quickly calculate the repercussions for their own

¹⁰One of our colleagues who experimented with peer teaching had parents of one student complain to the college dean that they paid outrageous tuition for their child to attend the university and expected the teaching to be done by a professor, not by other undergraduate students.

grades and effort if a classmate fails to cooperate. When students feel their grades are in jeopardy under these circumstances, they may become hostile toward group learning and alternative pedagogies that limit their control over grades. To prevent a breakdown of the community and a devaluation of the critical learning process, the teacher must reassure students that they will be evaluated on *how* they learn as well as *what* they learn. While theories, skills, and concepts are important subject matter, an evaluation of *how* a student learns questions their commitment to learning. Teachers can attribute a portion of the course grade to students' participation (vocal and non-vocal forms), their ability to incorporate personal experiences and others' experiences into class material, and their openness to dialogue.¹¹ Once students see that their grades are not in peril, they may feel liberated enough from system constraints to experiment with unconventional methods in the safe space of that course.

For teachers, experimenting with an alternative pedagogy can be taxing, time-consuming, and anxiety-producing, because it involves risks, uncertainties, problem-solving, and frequent coordination. A teacher may not effectively convince students (or their parents) of the value of de-centering power in order to foster a more democratic process and the utility of a non-traditional way of teaching. In addition, teachers recognize that bureaucratic institutions of higher education stipulate rules and regulations covering all processes from enrollment to evaluation. Some of these administrative control mechanisms that oversee and coordinate operations may undermine the liberating mode of teaching and

overshadow the force of empowerment. Added together, these challenges may result in an uneven or poor teaching performance that thwarts the enthusiasm of both teacher and learners. Furthermore, if a teacher feels stifled by institutional constraints, how can she or he expect students to feel emancipated?

As the discussion above suggests, the role of the teacher in the classroom is crucial. Like the moderator of a focus group, the professor's attitudes, experiences, and actions may all impact the class environment. Similarly, a teacher's power and authority are often critical in creating positive environments for student learning in the classroom. As Jennifer Gore (1993) argues, we should not dichotomize nurturance and authority, but recognize that authority is sometimes needed to embody nurturance and community. Rather than fearing power and authority, a teacher's challenge is to use them judiciously and effectively in the service of learning, steering away from exploitative and oppressive relationships.

Consequently, teachers should question whether their own roles in the classroom help to maintain oppressive learning systems rather than to foster student empowerment. Some feminists (Ellsworth 1992; Gore 1993; hooks 1994; Lather 1992) have criticized the notion that empowerment is *given to* students by a liberated teacher, primarily because this construction fails to problematize the teacher's power and knowledge. Analyzing the concept of power as "circulating," "exercised," and "existing in action," Foucault (1972) raises questions about the possibilities of empowering; not by giving power, but by helping others exercise it. As one student summed it up, "I was excited to hear the stress placed on the

¹¹Depending on the course type, class participation may constitute 20% of the course grade including students' class attendance, presentation, and leading discussion. On one occasion, our teacher set the conditions for collaborative learning and working by specifying in the course syllabus that members of the group would receive a group grade for everyone rather than individual grades. On another occasion,

she announced to the class on the first day that everyone was capable of receiving an "A" grade. Given this assumption, students were encouraged to work hard to maintain their "A" standard and not let it slide during the semester. This encouraged learners to take responsibility for producing course work of consistently good quality.

need to tap the participant's knowledge. The participants, themselves, are the experts. The researcher relinquishes her power and realizes the power in the experience of the individual at hand." Thus, adding the learner-directed participatory and experiential components through dialogue and interaction in the classroom aids in combating the idea that empowerment must work from the top down. In other words, DPE shifts our attention to power from within as a motivating basis for bottom-up learning.

Another challenge facing teachers and learners who follow the DPE approach is the building of community among those in the classroom, which can be thwarted by multiple factors. Hierarchies and inequalities based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and disability can limit cooperative efforts in teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships. For example, sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia are common factors shaping perception, bias, and discrimination—factors that not only affect the student's learning, but also politicize the teacher's performance and evaluation (Deats and Lenker 1994; hooks 1994; Romero and Margolis 1998; Sadker and Sadker 1994). These factors can make it difficult to achieve critical and feminist ideals and to reverse oppressive social, political, and cultural conditions that are buttressed by the matrix of domination. Pedagogical strategies and practices to combat all forms of "ism" are needed to embrace multiple voices, develop inclusive curricula, de-center power relationships, and transform the classroom as well as knowledge (Maher and Tetreault 1994; Parry 1996; Thompson 1998).

Recognition of the institutional bounds placed on classroom relationships leads to the importance of what Thompson and Gitlin (1995:146) refer to as "spaces" for learning:

One of the challenges is how to create spaces in which alternative forms of relationship can be experimented with and in which knowledge can be reconstructed, while still recognizing that institutional and traditional forms of

power tend to fill up the spaces and to reproduce and reinforce conventional knowledge. Spaces created within relationships, in other words, cannot offer a refuge from the pressures of prevailing relations of power. At best, they can offer the possibility of a defined space in which deliberate shifts can be made and shared experiments taken.

But no classroom is an island in itself, and dialogue and interaction should be placed in their institutional context. By making spaces in the classroom, it is possible to challenge constructions of knowledge and hierarchical relationships that are often supported by educational institutions and the broader society. Hierarchies that affect the social organization of our lives and elicit varying meanings in our lived experiences are so structurally embedded that they are hard, though not impossible, to dismantle. In discussing a safe space, Bernice Fisher (2001) suggests that keeping structures open and grounded supports the potential for making feminist classrooms safe for each individual's participation, so that their self-disclosure can be discussed and respected but not judged. She thinks that "Ideally the more fully that process of feminist discourse is pursued, the safer the classroom becomes for expressing ideas, experiences, feelings, and images of action in response to gender injustice" (Fisher 2001:149).

Spaces for learning created within a classroom community can disrupt traditional understandings of power and allow knowledge to be re-envisioned and reclaimed by learners and teachers. In our class, the teacher facilitated the creation of such spaces by letting students take on active roles that were critical to the success (or even failure) of the course. Evidence that students benefited from these opportunities comes from a number of their journal entries. One student who had no previous experience recruiting focus group participants wrote, "I was at first nervous...I found that with a little practice, I was able to explain the research very clearly to potential participants and to project the sense that it would be an interesting experience for them." An-

other student commented on how the open space created in the classroom transformed his educational experience. He proclaimed, "I, the learner, play the greatest role in my own education. I have the power to synthesize...[to] carve my education into the marble mind of myself!" Taken together, these comments suggest that the ability to create spaces for learning can have a variety of meanings for students.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on the intellectual traditions of critical literacy and feminist pedagogy, we have explored the nature, dynamics, and implications of the DPE approach to teaching and learning through the example of a focus group methods course in which we participated. The DPE approach attends both to the processes and to the products of teaching and learning. By expanding opportunities for student learning through teaching methods that emphasize dialogue, participation, and experience, potential outcomes for what is learned are broadened and valued as knowledge is deepened. In our class, we documented and discussed the emancipatory possibilities and the transformative power of the DPE approach as we experienced them. The guidance of our teacher and the willingness of students to work together formed the basis of a classroom community that was democratic, equitable, and empowering.¹² From the start, our teacher employed feminist principles and stressed the importance of embodying the values of TRUE PALS. We believe that the focus on such values enriched the dynamics of the class and helped us to address student concerns more openly when problems arose. Our experiences with DPE sug-

¹²The writing process of this paper is, in fact, a prime example of our experience of transitioning from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers. During the writing process of this paper, we utilized the essential elements of DPE to engage in team work, collaborative cooperation, dialogic exchange, and experiential sharing. The absence of the teacher in one part of

gest that much can be added to the learning processes through a teaching approach that is communicative, interactive, learner-centered, and experientially-based, benefiting students who are not only knowledge consumers but also knowledge producers.

The alternative approach of DPE challenges the domesticating forms of education that can trap students, especially racial minorities and women, in a culture of silence by ignoring the value of their existing knowledge and experiences, stifling their participation, and limiting initiatives toward educational change. However, no discourse is inherently liberating in the context of formal education. Consequently, we identified two critically important concepts—space and ownership—and explored how DPE can be used to foster both. Spaces, whether intellectual or social, are important for teachers and students to more fully engage in learning, thinking, and reflecting on their learning activities. Through community building, spaces can challenge traditional didactic forms of teaching, conventional ways of constructing knowledge, and prevailing hierarchical power relationships. Opening space thus enables both the learner and the teacher to challenge the status quo, redefine knowledge, and reclaim the learning process.

The second concept of critical importance in regard to DPE is ownership of teaching and learning. Traditional teaching places control of the classroom and ownership of knowledge largely in the hands of the teacher. Knowledge in such classrooms is typically seen as flowing from teacher to student. In contrast, the DPE approach encourages teachers and students to share intellectual ownership of teaching and learning experiences by becoming partners in practicing the DPE approach. In our focus

the process turned out to be beneficial because it created an intellectual space for students to take charge of the project and to work together without feeling constrained. The round robin technique was employed to allow individual authors to give input independently as well as collectively as a group.

group class, we experienced a blurring of roles which resulted in a more collective ownership of the teaching and learning processes.

Throughout this paper we have raised questions that teachers should ask themselves regarding the goals of classroom learning and opportunities for student dialogue, participation, and experience. We hope that teachers will be able to use this information to spur their own thinking and, ultimately, to create open, safe spaces in which students can take greater ownership of their own learning. Still, we do not claim to have a single formula, model, or template appropriate to all classrooms and circumstances. Teachers and students must define for themselves what is appropriate in their own classes and contexts. Our goal is to share our understanding of the DPE approach and, in this way, to facilitate its use by others who may be wrestling with similar issues relating to learning and teaching. DPE provides a flexible approach, albeit not without challenges, that may be tailored to courses that vary in goal, content, and curriculum/material, as well as in actors, institutional requirements, and classroom contexts.

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- Esther Ngan-ling Chow** is professor of sociology at American University. Her research interests include the intersection of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality; gender and development; migration; family and work; state theories; social inequality and poverty; social movements, globalization, and social justice. Her most recent publications are *Transforming Gender and Development in East Asia* (Routledge 2002) and a guest-edited special issue, "Gender, Globalization, and Social Change in the 21st Century" in *International Sociology*.
- Gang-Hua Fan** is currently a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin. He had his M.A. and B.A. degrees in sociology in American University (1998) and National Taiwan University (1995), respectively. He was the research assistant of "Sustainable Taiwan 2011" project in Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica from 1998 to 2000. His research interests include social stratification, social policy, and urban ecology.
- Chadwick Fleck** is a Training Specialist at the Peace Corps. He conducts pre-departure training for volunteers serving in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and himself served as a volunteer science teacher and teacher trainer in Nepal. Chad received his M.A. in Sociology: International Training and Education from American University, and B.A. in Zoology from Miami University, Ohio.
- Joshua Joseph** is the Senior Researcher for the Ethics Resource Center. He oversees and conducts research on issues relating to business ethics and culture. Josh is working on his doctoral dissertation in sociology at The American University and is a past recipient of a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship.
- Deanna M. Lyter** is a Research Scientist at the Education Statistics Services Institute, a division within the American Institutes for Research, in Washington, DC. She received her Ph.D. in Sociology from American University. Her research interests include the intersection of race/ethnicity, class, and gender; poverty and issues concerning low-income families; and inequality and education.