Chapter 7

Fostering Student Self-Awareness and Esteem to Participate and Transform Their Worlds:
Providing Public Spaces for Students to Hear Their Voices

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an example of American andragogy with a discussion on why and how to redesign a traditional classroom for college students to gain leadership skills and social justice awareness. Social justice action is especially important for students to research and discuss in order to create an environment where peace, security, and respectful engagement become part of students' leadership skills. After a discussion of American andragogy, the chapter focuses on redesigning spaces, roles, and expectations to create learning spaces that provide students with explicit reasons for participating in alternative learning spaces. The chapter concludes by emphasizing safe spaces and brave spaces as sites to encourage leadership skills and with it social justice awareness.

INTRODUCTION

Much research on the underlying power structures of current educational institutions has challenged inequality in its many forms (Berg, 2010; Jackson, 2013; Autor, 2014). However, we also need to examine what faculty/teachers can control, reimagine, and redesign for student learners to gain experience as researchers, designers, presenters, and leaders. As "advocates for inclusion" rather than "enact[ing] exclusionary policies aimed at keeping out non-elite students" (Benesch, 2001, p.130), teachers need to

redesign curriculum so that all students are provided with individual leadership experiences, regardless of backgrounds or previous academic success. This chapter focuses on a case study of courses in rhetoric, writing, and media design where students at the sophomore, junior, and senior levels participated in public presentations to emphasize leadership skills as well as social justice work.

Specifically, the concept of American andragogy (Knowles, 1970) is addressed with a discussion on why and how to redesign a traditional classroom for college students to gain leadership skills and social justice awareness. Social justice action is especially important for students to research and discuss in order to create an environment where peace, security, and respectful engagement become part of students' leadership skills. After a discussion of American andragogy, the chapter focuses on redesigning spaces, roles, and expectations to create learning spaces that provide students with explicit reasons for participating in alternative learning spaces. After discussing two events where students engaged in a faculty-organized conference, the chapter concludes by emphasizing safe spaces and brave spaces to encourage leadership skills and with it social justice awareness.

Throughout this chapter, I show how professional andragogical events exemplify Knowles' (1970) work as one way to strengthen student understanding of themselves as researchers who can present their arguments outside of the classroom. These leadership experiences, I show, can lead to direct engagement with issues of social justice beyond if the spaces designed for student exposure are safe while also allowing for brave interactions (Graham, 2021). To include students in discussions of social justice, students need to interact in a safe space before they can engage as brave citizens for social justice. When students cannot envision themselves speaking, writing, or presenting on social justice issues, they are discouraged by an educational system that often promotes attending class, sitting quietly, and learning from the teacher.

Brian Street (1984) reminds us that it is the responsibility of teachers to encourage students to engage critically and analytically with the world around them. Street argues that an "ideological literacy model" acknowledges social structures that influence our expectations of literacy. The "autonomous model" for literacy, on the other hand, includes an assumption that literacy is technical and neutral (Street, 1985). With large student numbers of first generation, ethnically diverse, rural southwestern, and members of the LGBTQ+ community, Street's (1984) ideological model of literacy provides teachers with opportunities to integrate diverse and sometimes distinct experiences with literacy.

BACKGROUND

An American University in the Southwest

The southwestern university that is central to this discussion is classified as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with 25.8% Latino students. The classification is granted when the university shows a Hispanic student population of 25% or greater. The remaining student population is 3.2% Black, 2.8% Indigenous, and 54.2% White. Of the total student population, 62.7% are women, and 37.3% are men with 60% receiving financial aid (NCES, 2021). The university attracts indigenous students from local reservations (largely from the Navajo Nation, as well as Hopi, and Apache), and largely Anglo and Latine students from across a rural southwestern state who are largely first generation students, working-class, and working-poor. In addition, over 27% of the university's student population claims English as a second language with Diné, Hopi, and Spanish as the dominant home languages.

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