Amanda Corcoran: Final Report: Wise Interventions Professional Standards Leave Fall 2018
Submitted by March 1 2019

The focus of the work proposed and completed during my leave was to investigate and develop an understanding of, and to develop portable training to support, effective collaborative learning across the disciplines. I used the primary principles of equity-based learning, cognitive theories, and contemplative pedagogy to investigate concrete, portable, and equitable and effective collaborative learning strategies, specifically designed to help support the College's own equity and social justice goals as well as the College's goals for student success. My ultimate conclusion is that all the concrete discussion strategies in the world are not going to work until we teach our students empathy for themselves and for others. Only then, can we build community in our classrooms and hope to achieve discussion capable of doing the transformative social justice and equity work of our College's goals.

Preliminary Work: My early thoughts on the essential role of discussion in learning tie directly to Brookfield and Preskill's sensible claim that classroom discussion remains a "moral, political, and pedagogical necessity" (x). They argue further that discussion skills support our students' democratic civil right and skill necessary to live in a democracy, helps learning, and builds community (x). The connection between this discussion project and the College's own social justice and equity goals remain clear. Discussion skills help our students participate and engage in our college, local, regional, and national conversations about democracy, equity, and social justice. They're an essential skill for our students to learn.

Brookfield and Preskill further argue that discussion offers students "a way of talking that emphasizes the inclusion of the widest variety of perspectives and a self-critical willingness to change what we believe if convinced by the arguments of others" (xvii). Effective discussion models democratic civic living centering around political choices of who gets what when---decisions which center upon respectful hearing of wide viewpoints around a problem, necessitating a self-critical openness to finding the most effective solution (BP xvii). They argue, in fact, that learning itself is a civil right—as is reading, so is writing, cultural and historical literacy, numerical skills, critical thinking, and discussion skills.

These authors further note that discussion reduces the focus on the instructor as the expert, builds student confidence in their own ideas, and builds critical thinking skills. Essentially, they note that discussion democratizes leadership since both discussion and democracy have the same root purpose---"to nurture and promote human growth" (Brookfield and Preskill 3). John Dewey similarly argues that democracy and discussion both lead to "the development of an ever-increasing capacity for learning and an appreciation of and sensitivity to learning undertaken by others." This process of giving and taking leads to a collective wisdom and understanding (Brookfield and Preskill 4)

Inspired by the social justice information within the rest of the Brookfield and Preskill's tome, I moved next to look in more detail at the crucial element of empathy, since this attribute seems essential to achieving John Dewey's goal of "development of an ever-increasing capacity for learning" and, crucially, for essential student development of an "appreciation and sensitivity to learning undertaken by others." Based on my research, I have learned that the single most effective method of supporting effective collaborative

learning is to both for the instructor themselves to possess, and then for the instructor to teach our students the role of, compassion and empathy in learning and in democracy.

My research has shown that it's only once students have compassion for both themselves and their peers that collaborative learning can begin. Like effective discussion and like wise interventions, compassion and empathy in the classroom don't happen by magic, yet they're an essential step in reaching an effective collaborative learning environment. Instructors need to model compassion and empathy for our students and then to teach our students how to use those skills in academic environments.

Based on my research from this past fall, I relied on this equation to develop my claim:
Self compassion $\rightarrow$ Compassion for others $\rightarrow$ Equitable/Academic Empathy $\rightarrow$ Shared Vulnerability $\rightarrow$ Learning

Early in my research, I realized the central question was "what is the shared ground of the various academic problems we ask our students to consider?" I believe that the questions we ask in all our disciplines have three foci to them: self, others, and academic problems. Asking students to willingly engage their real selves in their own learning can lead students to learn to approach others with the same compassion. At that point of shared academic empathy, I believe students can finally engage in the type of transformative learning to which the College aspires.

To clarify: I'm definitely not proposing that instructors at any point ask students about past traumas, tough childhood experiences, and other disruptive topics that require the skilled support of mental health professionals. While it's definitely worthwhile pondering how to implement college-wide skills in trauma-focused teaching, our unskilled probing of our students' traumas would do far more harm than good both for our students and for our learning environments. Instead, I am proposing that we overtly discuss the role of *academic empathy* with our students because I believe that this academic skill plays an early and essential role in the collaborative learning process.

Numerous relevant academic and critical learning resources help support my claim that academic empathy remains crucial to learning, including the following samples:
- The Paul-Elder critical thinking model relies heavily on what they call intellectual traits as necessary parts of their critical thinking model. These traits include intellectual humility, intellectual courage, intellectual empathy, intellectual autonomy, intellectual integrity, intellectual perseverance, confidence in reason, and fair-mindedness. This model emphasizes the great import of humility, courage, and empathy, amongst other "soft" attributes in order to build critical thinking skills.
- In "Learning to Learn," for example, Erika Anderson notes that "adept learners" possess four key qualities: aspiration, self-awareness, curiosity, and vulnerability. In that article, Anderson argues that teaching students to adopt a "beginner's mind" (from Zen Buddhism) could help those students see that "[i]n the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few." Essentially, she's claiming that showing our students that there's value in a novice perspective, that their patience with their (and their peers') beginner selves could lead to new perspectives and solutions to some important academic problems.
- Rogerian critical thinking skills, oft-included in Argument and Composition textbooks, demand the writer develop (and present) an empathetic understanding

of counter-arguments in order to keep the conversation going with those as yet unpersuaded.

- o Brookfield and Preskill further argue that, if supported, group members can learn to fulfill their academic group obligation to share as clearly as possible their own perspectives *as well as recognize and fulfill their obligation* to "devote every ounce of their attention to each speaker's words. . . All have the right to express themselves as well as the responsibility to create spaces that encourage even the most reluctant speaker to participate" (3)

Understanding that self-compassion is a crucial route to empathy and thereby effective discussion, I studied Kristen Neff and Christopher German's perspectives on self-compassion and mindfulness by enrolling in an 8-week Mindful Self-Compassion class (through a local provider) and an online 6 week follow-up class, provided by Neff and German. In those classes, I learned that crucially, yet perhaps counter-intuitively, mindful self-compassion proves essential to developing compassion for others and thus developing empathy. Building our own awareness of our own struggles to succeed can help us recognize and support other's similar struggles, even if those struggles do not exactly match our own. Being mindful of systemic inequities in our classes, disciplines, college, and society can help further that compassion into equity-based classrooms, syllabi, and assignments and ultimately help develop empathic students.

Self-compassion can play an essential equitable role in our students' academic lives. It's clear that our students face significant stress (personal, situational, systemic) in and out of the classroom. With institutionalized racism at all levels of society including at ARC, some students clearly face more stress than others. According to Zhang et al, however, self-compassion can help buffer our students' stress (Zhang et al). Once students can mindfully better handle their own stressors, they are in a more effective and self-regulated place to recognize that others also have stressors (personal, contextual, systemic discrimination). In fact, recognizing that their peers' stressors likely do not match their own (based on personal, situational, and systemic inequities) can help our students build a more thorough understanding of the need for systemic institutional change. Academic empathy can really help students understand further the equity-related perspective of "intention vs. impact."

Another related approach to teaching self-compassion and empathy comes through solution-focused pedagogy. As a mindful-based approach, solution-focused pedagogy emphasizes the fact that our students, as fellow humans, have already solved many complex problems in their lives before they reached our classrooms. Helping students see that they have developed problem-solving capacity, through their often complicated lives, can help them build their capacity of academic problem-solving through developing their own self-compassion and empathy (Måhlberg et al).

And so we arrive more fully at empathy, and we face the looming question of how to teach it to our tired, stressed, and overly committed students. In the past, many believed that since empathy was an innate trait, it could not be taught. However, cognitive research has since noted that this " vital human competency is mutable and can be taught" (Reiss). Indeed, arguing that "the personal distress experienced by observing others' pain often motivates us to respond with compassion," Reiss further notes that "the survival of our species depends on mutual aid, and providing it reduces our own distress." Empathy, therefore, is good for both the empathic and the recipient, which bodes well for our discussion groups.

How to teach empathy, though? Ah, there's the rub. Batson's study suggests that an effective strategy could enhance "perspective taking, the capacity to see a person's situation from his or her point of view, coupled with enhanced value being placed on the welfare of those who are unfamiliar can override bias" (Reiss). Over-riding that bias (of self, of disregard for inequity, of "color-blind" faculty and students) through perspective-taking can logically help build student empathy, so the question here, of course, is *how* to teach perspective-taking to our students. My research suggested a number of concrete strategies, of which these are a few:

a) **Peter Elbow's believing/doubting game**: this writing strategy asks students to first take on the position of completely believing a writer's argument perspective and then writing a paragraph from that perspective, noting the reasons and warrants underlying that side of the issue. The doubting part of the 'game' involves the student writer then taking on the perspective of someone who completely disagrees with original perspective, and the student writer then writing a paragraph, accurately and fairly describing the concerns, warrants, and beliefs of those who doubt the original argument's claims (Elbow).

b) **Stephen Toulmin's Toulmin analysis framework**: this framework asks student writers to deconstruct an argument (their own or another's), down to the counter-arguments and warrants (arguments underlying the major claims) to help student writers understand more fully the complexities of the argument.

c) **The Paul-Elder Critical Thinking model** has proven effective in my own classes to helping students understand the intellectual role of soft skills such as humility, courage, empathy, curiosity, fairness, and confidence in reason. This framework seems very adaptable to multi-disciplinary uses since all disciplines rely on critical thinking for full understanding.

d) Teaching students ways to enlarge their "circle of concern" and "circle of influence" (Stephen Covey concepts): https://uthscsa.edu/gme/documents/Circles.pdf

e) Teaching literature, modeling empathy, teaching mindfulness, and designing equity-focused discipline specific assignments designed to explore difference, inequities, social justice in your field, and many other strategies.

c. Explain how the work completed during your leave relates to ARC's goals and focus areas, and to the state's professional development guidelines.
This project related to the College's goals of "Student Success" and "Teaching and Learning Effectiveness." If our instructors can help our students build skills of self-compassion and empathy, these skills can help the students see more clearly some of inequities experienced by themselves, their peers, and others in the college. This profound widened perspective may lead to increased empathy and compassion for themselves and others, which can then help these students help themselves and their peers to succeed in and outside their classes. These compassionate achievements would then support the College's vision and mission, along with authentically supporting the College's Commitment to Social Justice and transformative education and leadership.

d. As a result of your leave, what will you take back with you to your current assignments and/or to the college as a whole (including how you shared or plan to share the results of your project).
In Spring 2019, I presented a 90-minute presentation on Discussion In Turbulent Times during PD Days at the College. I plan to offer a follow up presentation in Fall 2019 PD Days and then to see if New Faculty Academy would be interested in a presentation of similar content. I plan also to continue teaching mindful self-compassion and academic empathy to my students. These tasks would fulfill my stated responsibilities for this project.

I appreciate very much the opportunity to have the re-assigned time and the subsequent head-space to dive into this arena. I found the project intriguing, useful, and very practical, and I'm realizing I have still much to learn. I hope to apply for another re-assigned time in the next year or so to continue this research, so I can share it with my colleagues at the college. I think that empathy ties directly to equity and authentic care, both which tie directly to student success and transformative learning. I thank the Committee for your gracious support. AC

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