Creating Community: From Individual Reflection to SoTL Transformation

Beau Basel Beaudoin
Columbia College Chicago
Chicago, Illinois, USA
bbeaudoin@colum.edu

Abstract

Numerous studies have demonstrated that students thrive in courses where a *community* environment augments their learning experience through shared empowerment and enhanced participant engagement. This essay describes the author's originally self-directed efforts with classroom community approaches and the transition to utilizing SoTL's six standards of clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, outstanding results, effective communication and reflective critique to transform the process from experiment to standards-based assessment. Presenting examples of community practices with two substantially different demographics, a multi-section undergraduate media ethics course and a graduate class for teachers and teacher-candidates, the author suggests that others may benefit from a similar framework.

Keywords: community, standards of practice, multicultural perspectives, student engagement

Introduction

At the heart of the pedagogy that I have espoused for more than three decades is the concept of community: creating a safe space for shared knowledge and designing activities for maximum participant engagement toward goals of deeper awareness, understanding and growth. This essay describes two disparate courses and curricula where the concept of community has been the catalyst for learning and change. It also acknowledges how CASTL and the standards put forth by Boyer and Glassick in defining the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) influenced my reflections and analyses, transformed my teaching and validated the community concept now employed in scores of classes under my coordination.

Discovering Community

As a beginning teacher three decades ago, the inchoate and somewhat dated approaches that I had learned in college education courses were less than successful with my population of at-risk students in an overcrowded inner city Chicago high school. Through youthful dedication and naiveté more than any pedagogical theory, I became personally immersed in my students' neighborhood, culture and community, listened to their problems and priorities and reflected upon ways to connect these to the required curriculum. Gradually, they ceased to be a group of disinterested individual students and more like a cooperative working together, albeit a definitely ragtag and unorthodox kinship. This "community", however, was the nucleus of an actual learning atmosphere. Instead of "teaching" media, which they originally perceived as boring, we agreed upon goals that required learning skills to film documentaries of their real-life neighborhood problems. We formed peer tutoring within the groups to assist those with lesser abilities as well. At the time I had not read

1

articles about creating community, but had an intuitive sense of the necessity for student empowerment that progressively prospered. I kept journals, reflected, asked opinions of other teachers and revised ways to improve each semester on my own. Only later did I find corroboration from educators like Henderson and Nash (2007). "When the community members make connections between the course content and their own backgrounds, interests, and experiences, they are also making places in which to center discussions, and thus situate the learning" (p. 170).

A decade later, as a college instructor in a culture and media ethics course, the undergraduates once again demonstrated initial resistance to the curriculum: they objected to the required workload of substantial reading/writing and questioned the perceived value of the topic. However, when I introduced activities that afforded them opportunities to participate in diverse improvisation-based teams and form communities of practice that personalized their learning, a shift in attitude became evident. Media analysis projects with a shared purpose became the vehicle for common ground and eventually deep engagement into the cultural media work. The trial-and-error methods that ultimately proved successful originated in principles I discovered from many educators from Freire to Tinto about active learning, achievable goals, community-building, reflection and student feedback that led to my improved practice and mode of scholarship.

I had been teaching for nearly two decades without a formal plan to assess or evaluate my classroom methods, but independently accumulated books and articles on pedagogy, attended and presented at conferences, kept notes on observations and attended fellow instructors' classes to improve my skills. When our college initiated a *Center for Teaching Excellence,* I had the opportunity to participate in a CASTL program and became aware of the importance of sharing discoveries and honoring the profession of teaching as a reflective practitioner through an organized approach. What an epiphany! When I first read Glassick's *Scholarship Assessed* (1997) I recognized that I could utilize the *Summary of Standards* for assessment of my own classroom approach. I contemplated the most advantageous means to demonstrate Clear Goals, questioned my Adequate Preparation, analyzed how community concepts aligned with Appropriate Methods, and continued through the six standards questioning my Significant Results. Learning that SoTL provided a unified body of knowledge from like-minded professors sharing their research through workshops, conferences and journal articles provided me with a virtual community that I lacked earlier in my career. It also authenticated my daily teaching and learning. I published the findings of my research from pre and post course surveys of my *Culture, Race and Media* course (Beaudoin, 2006, 2010) in journals and I have facilitated workshops utilizing samples from my graduate teacher education course. The intention of this essay, however, is to offer descriptions of readily applicable processes of collaborative learning through community in two distinctly different courses and how the constructive SoTL framework inspired them.

The *Culture, Race and Media* Community
Undergraduate Media Arts Students

Were one to peer into my classroom at a media arts college where a culturally and racially diverse undergraduate student population of young artists and potential media makers participates in a *Culture, Race and Media (CRM)* course that emphasizes media ethics through a lens of cultural studies, s/he would see student-led discussions and activities predominating. The principal objective of the course is for students to recognize their ethical responsibilities as potential media makers. The primary focus of the process is analysis of popular media that may have influenced them, creating opportunities for introspection

through reading/viewing assignments on media literacy and cultural awareness leading to an understanding and critique of the values inherent in their own future creations/projects. I am fortunate to have a multicultural student population where much learning occurs through peer discourse from a diversity of backgrounds. The students' facilitation skills and owning of their curriculum begins as the students from a variety of majors in a School of Media Arts learn to identify how cultural difference can be as obvious as race and gender or as subtle as the socio-economic status of their families.

The students majoring in film, marketing, television, video gaming and numerous other media-related careers predominantly enter *Culture, Race and Media* from courses where production skills have been emphasized and where students may be more accustomed to lectures and demonstrations. In contrast, they immediately discover within each course objective of this syllabus some mention of group participation, shared goal setting, collaborative activities and multi-student quizzes as examples of the building process for community. Lessons reinforced in my first CASTL workshop were that each of my classes should include active learning, student feedback, problem-based assignments and regular revisions. Dynamically participating in our *CRM* community-based class, the media students are expected to analyze film, television and other media stereotypes, question ethical decisions as producers, writers, performers or directors, and candidly discuss race, gender and other culturally-based storylines with student-led facilitation rather than restrictive direction. These issues are potentially disconcerting and scary territory as Henderson and Nash express: "Very few things are more difficult to navigate than the fault lines of nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, gender orientations, disability, and age" (p. 180). Creating a safe environment with established ground rules of civility is a primary tenet of our process.

Banks & Banks (1997) encourage capitalizing on the strength of cooperative and social groupings within the classroom without the teacher's recurrent intervention and also emphasize peer tutoring. bell hooks (1994) speaks of creating community in classrooms to promote intellectual rigor. She writes that community creates a sense that there is shared commitment and a common good that binds the group.

> Working with a critical pedagogy based on my understanding of Freire's teaching, I enter the classroom with the assumption that we must build "community" in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor. It has been my experience that one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice. . . to listen to one another is an exercise in recognition. It also ensures that no student remains invisible in the classroom (pp. 40-41).

And equally important, as I discovered as a novice high school teacher in the inner city:

> Community not only serves the learning process but also is its own lesson. That is, it reminds us that the world exists in relationships and that knowing is always about a relationship. We may begin to recognize that the housing development becomes a neighborhood only if we know our neighbors (Hart, 2009, p. 48).

Community for the students in *CRM* also means that there are clear expectations, including unconditional respect, rules of conduct, and a promise of authenticity on the part of the instructor, as well as opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue where ideas, issues,

and conceptualizations are freely developed, articulated, debated and moved forward toward shared progress.

I use several techniques for establishing and maintaining a safe environment, especially given the sensitive topics. For example; each class begins with specific media vignettes from films, television, games or *YouTube* as catalysts for conversations analyzing the media characters with regard to race, gender or sexuality. We do not appear to be discussing our own biases, but those of the fictional characters on the screen as we probe ethical developments or storylines. In this manner safely critiquing characters' motivations affords time for personal introspection. Their own potential prejudices or misunderstandings can be analyzed after acquiring necessary skills and confidence with the community process.

Concurrently, each week has required readings on specific cultural topics beginning with gender, and proceeding to ethnicity, race, sexuality, religion, ability and socio-economic class which the students are expected to facilitate in small group dialogues with alternating leaders to provide rigor and theoretical constructs with which to frame conversations rather than mere opinions. Another required community-building element is that before and between discussions and analyses we engage in a variety of exercises - actual physical ones. From the *Gordian Knot* to charades and improvisations to small group presentations - each relating to the day's cultural topic – all of us are standing and moving and engaging with our community for at least an hour of the three-hour class period as ethical and multicultural schemas are probed, considered, explored and disputed.

Additionally, there are compulsory written reflections on each article and every student is required to post individual media samples to weekly online forums on our course website http://cultureraceandmedia.com where peers comment on each other's personal media examples and ask further questions to provide clarity and continuity. Each of the current eighteen sections of the 25-student *CRM* course is separate and password protected. This ensures a "safe" online community of only their class members so that ideas and suggestions are within established relationships fostered in the physical classroom space.

One community technique that often meets with initial disapproval until actually experienced is the collaborative written quiz. Although I believe in myriad approaches to evaluate student learning, I do not find written quizzes of their ethical awareness a particularly effective assessment tool. However, to ensure that students read the requisite articles, quizzes comprised of four questions requiring short essay responses are distributed. After opportunity to reflect individually, students are randomly placed in four-member groups where they discuss and compare their answers at length before each student replies to the question of his/her choice in full. One master quiz with the four written responses is submitted and each student is awarded the group grade whether each student participated equally or not. Mid-semester and post-class surveys have indicated that community input and discussion became the integral element in learning; pair studying became a strategy if any member was a weaker link in the responses; students learned responsibility for helping each other to understand the readings; and, re-takes of the quiz with no penalty after peer-tutoring resulted in personal accomplishment in addition to deeper engagement. In actuality the scores of the early written quizzes were unimportant. True learning occurred through the community conversations, ownership of best practices for studying, support for each other and development of team responsibility.

How did Scholarship of Teaching and Learning approaches, especially the community aspect, become the framework and foundation for the *CRM* course? The standards reinforced in *Scholarship Assessed* by Glassick et al guided my decisions as new elements

to increase student ownership were initiated and revised every semester. Glassick indicated that "these six standards can be applied to all forms of scholarship proposed by Boyer: the scholarship of discovery, of integration, of application, and of teaching" (2000). I created a spreadsheet for each standard and utilized sub-categories of the questions under each. Instructors teaching other sections of *CRM* under my coordination received copies of the standards with requests to include their methods, rationale, etc. and also to critique what was not working. For brevity, below is a sample of one question from one instructor of Standard One in the complete spreadsheet:

Clear Goals: Use SMART approach – Specific, Measured, Achievable, Reasonable, Time-based
Define *CRM*'s goal of student recognition of his/her ethical responsibilities
Utilize media samples as catalyst for critical inquiry
Establish community concept as foundational through activities rather than explanation
Emphasize student ownership and participation

Basic purpose stated clearly?   Online course syllabus states goals
Ethics of media defined in Class 1
Interdisciplinarity of media, ethics and cultural awareness evident in all course materials
Rationale for community activities woven into introductory lessons

Inspired by SoTL, I looked for further evidence of community successes from other research. McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk & Schweitzer (2006) conducted a study of students in a psychology class at a midsize midwestern university regarding student learning factors. Those students whose sense of community scores were the highest showed the most improvement between the first and last exams. "This sense of community, in turn, has been shown to relate not only to students' perceptions of their performance and their satisfaction with the course, but also with measures of their actual performance" (p. 283).

A *community of instructors* of *Culture, Race and Media* became another component of my practice under the standard of Effective Presentation. Asking if "the scholar uses appropriate forums for communicating the work" resulted in two significant changes: increased meetings with instructors of the eighteen sections of *CRM* from twice yearly to every eight weeks where questions and suggestions were proffered within the instructor community; and creation of an *Instructor Forum* page on our website for faculty to communicate their successes and ideas to each other weekly or even daily. Instead of the top-down curriculum that I originally created, most members of our instructor community now post suggestions for media samples and share evaluations of activities and discussions. We also began an informal program of peer observations and team-teaching leading to a dynamically changing curriculum. Once the faculty internalized community the innovative practices multiplied exponentially. Some of the extra hours donated by instructors are compensated by end-of-semester social events exclusively for *CRM* faculty that are attended by all. As Glassick stated in a 1997 interview:

Our studies of faculty satisfaction show that faculty satisfaction is more closely related to being appreciated, being valued, than it is related to

salary. If you're clear about what is expected, faculty will respond (Baird, 1997).

The instructors described above, however, had applied to teach *Culture, Race and Media* aware of its objectives, its community emphasis and its ideology of an open curriculum with substantial student input. Could community be employed in a graduate course with entirely different goals and student population?

Teachers and Teacher-Candidates
A Graduate School Course in Multicultural Dimensions within the Classroom

If you crossed three blocks from the media classrooms on our campus to the Graduate School of Educational Studies, you may observe approximately 30 teachers and teacher-candidates engaged in charades, diversity-based games, arranging found objects into art displays or small discussion groups sitting in corners of the classroom with noise and laughter in evidence. They are a far less diverse population, all current elementary or high school teachers and teacher-candidates with a median age of approximately 26 years, with inclusion of some senior teaching veterans. When I became their instructor with a previously established format and syllabus for this multicultural education course of participants concerned with completing certification requirements, many were primarily accustomed to lecture and eager to dutifully complete written assignments. Their principal goal was to obtain specific answers to myriad questions of multicultural education applications from me, the experienced teaching professor. I had learned from SoTL that Effective Presentation involves creating intersections between the concerns of the students and the curriculum, including their attachment to a previous learning environment.

When I introduced dialogue and dialectic into the class, as defined by Freire and Masterman, beginning with a series of questions and requesting that all chairs be arranged in a circle, it appeared that this demographic may not be receptive to a community paradigm. Eight years later, assessments from course evaluations, departmental class observations and post course surveys indicate the value and success of community and dialogue as the philosophical keystones of this graduate course in multicultural education methods.

With this population my deeper concern was how to create an inquiry-driven community since they required specific methods in multicultural approaches for their own students in schools with diverse ethnic and racial demographics. Compared to *CRM*, media examples would not be appropriate catalysts, nor would undergraduate-level group discussions be suitable. Improvisational games and physical movement, however, once again served as introduction to participant comfort, engagement and empowerment. New rules of commitment were connected to the circle arrangement when small groups returned to share solutions or questions with the full community, after assignments including readings by Parker Palmer were strategically added. In *The Courage to Teach* (1998), Palmer urges us to both physically and allegorically place whatever subject within our expertise "in the center", requiring students and teachers to sit in a circle to communicate and create knowledge together.

Utilizing specific research-based articles for their foundation, especially on Equity Pedagogy, as defined by James Banks, Sonia Nieto and Carlos Cortes, the teachers gradually accepted an environment that morphed from instructor lecture to case studies, to multiple analyses of scenarios and simulations of school/family situations. Praxis became a foundational element

in the Aristotelian mode of voluntary, goal-directed actions rather than theoretical discussions.

Additional readings on research findings of this action process and scaffolding were added to the curriculum. Eventually, the aspiration became a true dialectic, recognizing that the phases from discussions to authentic dialogue, as defined by Freire, Masterman and Riegel, needed to evolve with clear purpose.

> Discussion, whilst far preferable to teacher-dominated discourses, and having some potential to transform consciousness, often falls short of this. At its most limited, dominated and controlled by the teacher, it can be merely a manipulative mechanism for enabling her to pass on information already in her possession. Dialogue, on the other hand, involves a genuine sharing of power – even if differential power relationships exist outside of the dialogue . . . It is genuinely a *group* process (Masterman, 1985, pp. 32-33).

One of the most difficult elements for this community to accept was that dialogue does not attempt to dissolve contradictions into consensus since many teacher-candidates continued to request the "correct" solution from me or from each other. Eventually, most understood that my perceived ambiguity or reticence to respond with firm answers was necessary for their development. Despite initial challenges, the organic nature of the community grew to trust the process. "Dialogue seeks to understand phenomena, including the group's own activities, not as static and 'knowable', but always in their processes of change and development" (Masterman, 1985 p. 33).

I interpreted Shulman's call for scholarly teaching where a teacher "transforms what he or she already knows into new representations that can help students make sense of the world" (p. 3) as validation for this process where teacher-candidates owned their power to discover the required answers within their community.

Obviously, my obligations as professor include providing curricular information and assessing students' individual work as well as organizing compulsory course readings and particularized reflections. Learning is not solely through community although an integral component. Studies have shown, however, that strategic dialogue is a more effective path to understanding for most students than when people attempt to make meaning out of difficult concepts alone. In *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (2003), Fink also draws connections between community and learning.

> When we engage in dialogue with others, the possibility of finding new and richer meanings increases dramatically. In addition, when people collaboratively search for the meaning of experiences, information and ideas, they also create the foundation for *community*. Creating a sense of community is a concept that can greatly enhance the quality of a learning experience at the level of an individual course and at the level of the whole college experience (p. 106).

Numerous educators have reported that students participate more fully in environments where learning comes from a variety of perspectives instead of originating with one faculty member (Tinto, 1997), and thrive in communities where they can bring selected aspects of their lives to the learning space to share with each other (Henderson & Nash 2007). We

also know that students' involvement influences their learning (Astin, 1993; Parker & Schmidt, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). As Hart reminds us: "It is in a community that ideas are tested and our understandings challenged and debated, and this is fundamental to growing knowledge" (2009, p. 48).

Final Thoughts

I had two intentions in writing this essay: to share a metaphorical window into two disparate courses where the concept of community was successfully incorporated and to honor the SoTL standards of Specific Results and Effective Presentation though an essay of my experiences in IJ-SoTL. Whether in a graduate class of teacher candidates or with undergraduate media makers, communities remind us that the world is about relationships and our own thinking expands in relation to other people. My hope is that these descriptions of successful strategies encourage greater community and dialectic approaches.

Are better measures of assessment needed to prove the efficacy of community? Are others in the SoTL community utilizing community concepts with differing results? These and other questions remain unanswered here. In perusal of the past four years of IJ-SoTL articles I found little on the topic although there are substantial number of studies from non-SoTL authors. This was the rationale for my narrative sketches of two disparate courses.

On a personal note, although I am a senior faculty member with a typical teaching load who annually presents workshops at conferences, and who additionally coordinates/facilitates the cultural teaching methods course for adjuncts for our Center for Teaching Excellence each semester, I have not published widely in my career. Given the alternative between including innovative pedagogical findings into my next class activity and for a presentation to newly appointed faculty, or sitting down to document the same for a journal article, I have historically chosen the former.

When I was nominated for the Carnegie Foundation Professor of the Year award by my college, it was required that I submit an essay of my teaching philosophy. Writing it served to remind me that one who aspires to SoTL standards has an obligation to publish ideas and results for the larger academic community. When honored by receiving the POY award, I realized that I had become a member of another community with commensurate responsibilities. Recognizing that data based documentation can better substantiate my narrative I have begun new analysis of current pre-post surveys regarding the connections between community engagement in the *CRM* course and measures of actual student performance since it appears that quantitative research is the coin of the realm.

Schulman states that to be considered scholarship the work must be made public, available for peer review and be able to be reproduced by other scholars (2000). Hart writes that "community is so central because it enables dialogue and creates a dynamic tension; we never know quite where the conversation will lead" (2009, p.48). My aspiration is that other scholars will benefit from the experiences and descriptions shared in this essay. If new conversations and communities evolve in the process the circle ever expands.

References

Astin, A. (1987). *Achieving educational excellence*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Astin, A. (1993). *What matters in college: Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Baird, D. (1997). Scholarship reconstructed: An interview with Charles Glassick, *ultiBASE, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University.* Retrieved from http://ultibase.rmit.edu.au?Articles/june97/glass1.htm

Banks, J. A. & Banks, C. A. (Eds.). (1997). *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Beaudoin, B.B. (2006). Through a media lens: Perspectives on culture, race, gender & truth. (Doctoral dissertation). Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, UMI 3196612.

Beaudoin, B. B. (2010). Differentiating between "the" media and "our" media. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, *1(2),* 99-108.

Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate.* Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation.

Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Fink, L.D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences.* San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass.

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

Glassick, C. E., Huber, M.T & Maeroff, G. I. (1997). *Scholarship assessed: Evaluation of the professoriate.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Glassick, C. E. (2000). Boyer's expanded definitions of scholarship, the standards for assessing scholarship, and the elusiveness of the scholarship of teaching. *Academic Medicine,* 75(9), 877-879.

Hart, T. (2009). *From information to transformation: Education for the evolution of consciousness.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Henderson, G. & Nash, F. S. (2007). *Excellence in college teaching and learning: classroom and online instruction.* Springfield, IL Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, Ltd.

hooks, b. (1994b). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom.* New York: Routledge.

Masterman, L. (1985). *Teaching the media.* New York: Routledge.

McKinney, J.P., McKinney, K.G., Franiuk, R. & Schweitzer, J. (2006). The college classroom as a community: Impact on student attitudes and learning. *College Teaching 54(3),* 281-4.

Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Parker, J. & Schmidt, J. (1982). Effects of college experience. In H. Mitzel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Research (5th ed.).* New York: Free Press.

Pascarella, E. T. & Terenzini, P. (1980). Predicting persistence and voluntary dropout decisions from a theoretical model. *Journal of Higher Education, 51*, 60-75.

Shulman, L. S. (2011). The scholarship of teaching and learning: A personal account and reflection. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 5(1).*

Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education, 68,* 599-623.

Personal Reflection: Playing for SoTL Impact: A Personal Reflection. Â The closing panel was framed to mirror the micro, or individual impact; meso, or department and institutional impact; and macro, or national impact and beyond. Dr. Marlee Spafford spoke about the ways her research and therefore, promotion and tenure submissions, have focused on her SoTL work in optometry - a science-related discipline, and a professional school as well. While you can use reflection to create new functions, thereâ€™s no way to create new methods at runtime. This means you cannot use reflection to implement an interface at runtime. It also means that using reflection to make a new struct can break in strange ways. Â However, if you use reflection to build a struct with embedded fields and you try to access the methods on those fields, you can get some very odd behavior. The best thing to do is to stay away from using them. Thereâ€™s an issue in the Go GitHub repository to fix this https://github.com/golang/go/issues/15924, and another one asking for the general ability to define a new type with a set of methods https://github.com/golang/go/issues/16522. Reflection Paper Siyuan Wu Reflection on the group project Introduction In the past few weeks, Dan, Matt and I worked together on our group projectâ€"Social approaches to SLA. The Purpose of our group project is not only allow us--- the instructors as well as the learners to investigate SLA in social situation but also try to help our classmates put â€œSLA in the headâ€ aside and look through SLA from social prospective. When we three were conducting our project, the questions of how to organize our sessions, how to relate our topic to the previous groups and lead out the next groups, and how to ma