



Talking About Teaching: The Psychosocial Benefits of Critical and Compassionate Classrooms

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Abstract

This commentary explores the psychosocial benefits of integrating critical and compassionate approaches within contemporary classrooms. Emphasizing the synergistic relationship between fostering intellectual rigor and emotional support, it highlights how such educational environments promote holistic student development. By drawing on the work of bell hooks, particularly her insights on critical thinking, teaching community, and the transformative power of love in education, the commentary delves into the ways in which these classrooms enhance critical engagement, empathy, and a sense of community among students. The discussion addresses the challenges of creating such environments and offers practical strategies for educators. Ultimately, this commentary advocates for the adoption of critical and compassionate pedagogies to cultivate both academic excellence and emotional well-being in students.

Key Words: Critical Thinking, Compassion, Teaching and Learning, Equity and Inclusion of Voice, Liberatory and Engaged Pedagogy

Introduction

In the landscape of contemporary education, the integration of critical and compassionate approaches within the classroom is not only beneficial but essential for fostering holistic student development. Informed by select scholars [1-5] I believe and define critical and compassionate classrooms are those where intellectual rigor and emotional support coexist, creating environments that nurture both the mind and the heart. These classrooms do not merely aim to impart knowledge but also to develop well-rounded individuals who are capable of critical thinking, social awareness, and empathy. Drawing on the insights of influential educators like bell hooks, this commentary explores the profound psychosocial benefits of such an educational paradigm. By examining the interplay between critical thinking and compassion, this essay highlights how these approaches can transform the educational experience, promoting not only academic success but also emotional resilience and a sense of community among students. "To educate for freedom, then, we have to challenge and change the way everyone thinks about pedagogical process. This is especially true for students"[2]. Incorporating hooks' concepts of engaged and liberatory pedagogy and community

building this commentary underscores the importance of nurturing the whole student and creating a supportive, inclusive learning environment. It also explores the transformative power of critical dialogue and care in teacher-student relationships, demonstrating how these principles can bridge gaps and foster mutual respect.

Psychosocial Benefits of Critical Classrooms

Critical classrooms, as advocated by bell hooks, prioritize the development of critical thinking skills and intellectual growth. In her book *Teaching to Transgress* [2], hooks emphasizes that education should challenge students to think deeply and question prevailing norms, thereby fostering intellectual independence and a deeper understanding of the world. This critical engagement not only enhances cognitive abilities but also promotes social awareness and a commitment to justice. According to hooks, "No education is politically neutral ... "[2]. Therefore, awakening students critical consciousness can sometimes be uncomfortable. Additionally, some students push back on participating in discussion-based courses at first because they have settled for the "banking system of education". As discussed by Paulo Freire [6] in his groundbreaking work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, describing teaching and learning in which students only need to memorize and recall new information rather than grappling with a deeper meaning and critique of concepts. By encouraging students to critically examine societal structures, multiple perspectives, and historical implications educators can inspire a sense of agency and empowerment, thereby motivating students to become active participants in their communities and advocates for change.

For instance, this is accomplished in my classes on the first day and throughout the tenure of the class. Students are told what is expected of them and what they can expect from me as their instructor. In the first-class session, we review the course syllabus, course requirements, and importantly the course management system in order to create awareness and foster comfort as we proceed. In the first class and beyond, I model my willingness to field questions and foster a sense of approachability. Students appreciate these first day activities and getting to know their classmates. As the instructor and lead facilitator of this educational journey, I gauge where my students

are through informal questioning and activities that offer insight into who they are as individuals and collective learners. Small group discussion allow time to critically examine concepts and foster shared learning and query. One way I begin to develop their critical thinking skills is through small group discussion questions or quotes. Students count off 1-4 and are placed in "Learning Teams". These teams will typically remain for the semester allowing students to bond in the class. Learning Teams are given discussion questions, prompts, role plays, or a quote to think about and provide their assessment/understanding or reflections on the meaning of a quote. Small groups are given 10-15 minutes depending on the tasks and class time. These groups are switched once or twice during the semester so that students can become acquainted with other classmates. The success of pedagogy of creating a critical classroom is illuminated in the following quote from one of my students:

"The student that walked in on day 1 is vastly different than the student at the end of the course. The principles, methods, and ideas brought forth open a framework to create equitable, meaningful class environments. Students learn material but also learn from Dr. Wheeler's instructional attitude and class structure, which complement the material" (Student evaluation comment, Spring 2023, EDFN 415 Educational Thought and Secondary Schooling).

In my experience, most students love the opportunity to discuss and make meaning of what they are studying. To combat resistant students, I work with them to make connections between theory and practice, between theory and real-world issues and problems. Collectively as a community, we also strategize about solutions to selective problems or community related concerns.

Psychosocial Benefits of Compassionate Classrooms

Compassionate classrooms, on the other hand, focus on building emotional resilience and empathy. In *Teaching Community*, hooks [3] explain the importance of creating a learning environment that is supportive and inclusive, where students feel safe to express themselves and take risks. Such environments reduce anxiety, improve mental health, and foster a sense of belonging. In this regard, one of my students wrote the following in their evaluation: *"Dr. Wheeler is incredible. She cares so deeply about her students and learning and did a great job making a short summer course not overwhelming while still incredibly rewarding"* (Student evaluation comment, Summer 2022, EDFN 305 History and Philosophy of American Public Education).

When students experience compassion and understanding from their teachers and peers, they are more likely to develop positive relationships and a strong sense of self-worth. This emotional support is crucial for their overall well-being and academic success. "When teachers teach with love, combining care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, we are often able to enter the classroom and go straight to the heart of the matter, which is knowing what to do on any given day to create the best climate for learning" [3]. Developing a compassionate classroom community experience that fosters and develops one's ability for intellectual, social, and sometimes emotional risk-taking begins with you, the instructor. You must be prepared to be your authentic and sometimes vulnerable self. In the courses I teach, I begin building community and connection on Day One. In my first meeting with students, I prioritize creating class community and the need to become acquainted with one another. Students are asked to provide some initial information about who they are and why they are taking the class, alongside something unique about them in terms of talent, skills, or experience. I begin this activity modeling for students by sharing two things: one personal and one not so personal so students feel free to share either. This first day activity, including my modeling for students, allows students to share with no risk. Students have commented in my evaluations

about the strong sense of community they feel in my courses and how they establish connections with their classmates. For example, another of my students wrote in their evaluation: *"Open dialogue about the field of education and our experiences as preservice and current educators. The content is relevant, the conversations are enriching, and it is a place where we feel comfortable to learn, adjust, grow, and eventually apply to our classroom"* (Student evaluation comment, Summer 2023, EDFN 405 Development of Educational Thought).

In essence, my classrooms showcase shared experiences and connections among students. By leveraging every possible resource, I aim to discover innovative and enjoyable low stake activities that connect us on our journey of exploration and learning, while simultaneously creating pathways for knowledge. Activities that celebrate the different backgrounds, identities, beliefs, skills, and talents that each student brings to the classroom honors multiple ways of knowing and constructing knowledge. One important practice I employ is offering varied assessment methods of learning such as informal (in-class activities, role plays, debates) and formal (discussion boards, reflection essays, group presentations, research topic, person, cause) activities where students' learning and understanding is revealed. Unlike traditional pedagogies, I know that dependence solely on multiple-choice tests or short answer/blue book tests does not optimize or honor the varied learning styles of students. Operating with the mindset of wanting to create meaningful learning experiences in class content, and information distribution is how I assess student's comprehension and skills development. I teach my students actively and actively seek to have them express their learning to me.

Integrating Critical and Compassionate Approaches

The integration of critical and compassionate approaches in the classroom creates a powerful synergy. According to hooks [2-4] the practice of engaged pedagogy involves nurturing the whole student, addressing both intellectual and emotional needs. For instance, case studies from various educational settings demonstrate that students who feel emotionally supported are more likely to engage critically with the material. Strategies for teachers to implement these approaches include creating collaborative learning experiences, encouraging open dialogue and modeling compassionate behavior. By fostering both critical thinking and compassion, educators can create dynamic learning environments where students thrive academically and emotionally. According to Hao, "critical compassionate pedagogy," is a pedagogical commitment that allows educators to criticize institutional and classroom practices that ideology place underserved students at disadvantaged positions, while at the same time be self-reflexive of their actions through compassion as a daily commitment" [1]. Hao's [1] study provides a blueprint and rationale for employing critical and compassionate classroom practices that all students can benefit from.

Challenges and Considerations

Creating critical and compassionate classrooms comes with its challenges. One potential obstacle is resistance from students or institutions that are accustomed to traditional, hierarchical models of education. Additionally, ensuring inclusivity and equity in these approaches requires careful consideration of diverse student backgrounds and needs. However, by adopting hooks' principles of love and care, teachers can overcome these challenges and build stronger, more inclusive communities. As I have already indicated, hooks argues that love in education is transformative, as it builds trust and mutual respect, thereby creating a more effective learning environment. As many of my student evaluations show, overcoming these challenges can occur when instructors use methods and activities of love, trust and mutual respect.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the psychosocial benefits of critical and compassionate classrooms are manifold. According to [1, 4, 5] these educational environments promote intellectual growth, social awareness, emotional resilience, and a sense of community among students. “To work for justice, changing our educational system so that schooling is not the site where students are indoctrinated to support imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy or any ideology, but rather where the learn to open their minds, to engage in rigorous study and to think critically. Creating classrooms as a life-sustaining and a mind-expanding place, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and students work together in partnership” [3]. By integrating the insights of scholars such as bell hooks, educators can create classrooms that not only prepare students for academic success but also nurture their emotional well-being and empower them to contribute positively to society. Based upon my classroom experiences and student evaluations, I have found that the adoption of critical and compassionate pedagogies is essential for cultivating well-rounded individuals capable of navigating and improving an increasingly complex world.

Competing Interests: The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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