

Pedagogy Primer



Grassroots Pedagogy: Practicing Justice in Collaborative Classrooms

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Abstract

Most universities champion “community engagement” and “inclusion” as core values of their institutions. But what does it mean to meaningfully engage with communities, or to foster more inclusive learning environments? I address this question by reviewing my experiences co-teaching with communities and detailing the challenges I have encountered – building relationships, managing time constraints, and negotiating participants’ divergent expectations. I develop the concept of *grassroots pedagogy*, which argues that teaching grounded in radical honesty and social justice upends traditional notions of expertise, strengthens higher education’s commitment to service, and promotes a culture of democracy. Highlighting the voices of people who have historically been excluded from higher education may create more engaged and inclusive institutions, in turn helping universities live up to the values they profess.

Keywords

grassroots pedagogy – teaching – learning – social justice – community engagement – higher education

Introduction

Most universities champion “community engagement” and “inclusion” as core values of their institutions. But what does it mean to meaningfully engage with communities, or to foster more inclusive learning environments? I address this question by reviewing my experiences co-teaching with communities and detailing the challenges I have encountered – building relationships, managing time constraints, and negotiating participants’ divergent expectations. I develop the concept of *grassroots pedagogy*, which argues that teaching grounded in radical honesty and social justice upends traditional notions of expertise, strengthens higher education’s commitment to service, and promotes a culture of democracy.¹ Highlighting the voices of people who have historically been excluded from higher education may create more engaged and inclusive institutions, in turn helping universities live up to the values they profess.

To understand how grassroots pedagogy can help universities achieve their community engagement and inclusion initiatives, a few terms need clarification. “Engagement” has become somewhat of a catch-all solution for everything from politics to journalism. Engagement editors now work for many news organizations, developing audience strategies often based on social media metrics and online analytics, and helping newsrooms better understand their readers (Manovich 2018). Rather than viewing engagement as something that can be quantified, grassroots pedagogy understands engagement as a series of social processes that are influenced by space, time, technology, and emotion (Steensen et al. 2020).

Navigating these processes asks students and faculty to practice “radical honesty” – a Black-feminist approach to education and organizing that embraces emotion in the service of truth-telling (Williams 2017). Radical honesty means bringing our whole selves to the classroom, sharing our individual and collective experiences, and fostering accountability and trust through transparency. Acknowledging the uneven power dynamics within classrooms requires developing an ethic of care and mutual respect.

Developing Partnerships and Earning Trust

Community organizing functions best when trust exists among all participants. Trust is earned slowly and over time, usually after organizers have

¹ For the poem “Grassroots Pedagogy,” see: Huckaby 2016.

demonstrated that they are reliable. In my experiences as a documentary filmmaker, researcher, and educator, introductions are the first step to developing trust (Canella 2022). I often enter community organizing projects by attending public meetings where I can listen to the community's issues and identify core organizers who can facilitate my access. After the meeting, I then approach core organizers and discuss with them my intentions and interest in developing a partnership. These conversations demand patience and humility – while one partnership required six months to establish a working relationship, another required only two weeks. Although core organizers can bring you closer to a community and its issues, especially if you are approaching the group as a relative outsider, the group's openness to collaborators will vary. This could be due to various reasons: perhaps they have had negative experiences working with researchers, or maybe the organization has limited staff and does not have the capacity to support a partnership. I discuss with students the importance of the introductory stage and why it is necessary to slow down, listen, and follow the lead of key stakeholders prior to conducting interviews or filming video.

Although these moments may feel to students like they are not making progress, they set an initial tone for the project and create opportunities for everyone to discuss their expectations. I use two exercises in my Grassroots Journalism class that illustrate the importance of the introductory stage. The first is community research. During a partnership with the Somerville News Garden, a volunteer-led community newsroom in Somerville, Massachusetts, students conducted community research by interviewing residents about their news preferences and asking them what issues they most want covered. In addition to giving students story ideas for their multimedia reporting, the exercise furthered their understanding of journalism's role in society. The second exercise is a social scavenger hunt.² In teams of two, students try to complete various "challenges" around the city – for example, posting a photo of a local business to social media and including a caption that mentions the business and why it caught their attention. The learning objectives here are two-fold: students develop collaborative skills that are essential for working in journalism and media, and students are encouraged to go into the community and interact with residents in an enjoyable way.

The academic calendar poses challenges for slow, intentional relationship building. Students are sometimes concerned that they will not be able to complete the required assignments after spending the first six weeks of the semester conducting background research and establishing the partnership. I taught a community-based class that sidestepped this issue with a creative shortcut:

² Detailed instructions for the social scavenger hunt available here: <https://bit.ly/3aGImzM>.

community partners were identified and confirmed by faculty prior to the semester. In this instance, faculty contacted various community organizations and asked if they would like to participate in a civic media class. Several organizations confirmed their participation, and they subsequently visited the classroom in the first three weeks of the semester to meet with students and discuss their work. Students then selected a partner based on their interests and created a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with their partner, which outlined the nature of the partnership. Because this approach removes certain social practices that are essential to community-based work, I have mixed feelings about it. Identifying and confirming a partner asks students to navigate various personalities and negotiate divergent expectations. These moments reveal the social and emotional nature of engagement. But I understand why this approach may be used: students may be new to the area or they may be uncomfortable contacting community organizations. This can lead to shaky partnerships and projects that collapse midway through the semester. Of course, failed partnerships also provide students with instructive lessons, but these experiences are not ideal and often leave everyone frustrated.

Community organizers have shared several insights with me about the importance of the introductory stage. These early conversations create space for participants to discuss potential projects and to learn about each other. One organizer said transparency is needed from the beginning. Students, faculty, and communities must have open and honest communication during the relationship building stages – to talk, debrief, and ask questions. Creating a group text, Slack channel, or private Facebook group in which students can ask questions, share ideas, post links, and develop resources is one method I have used in my classes. One organizer told me that these initial conversations must be a two-way exchange. “Students are not simply coming in to learn about me or my neighborhood,” she said. “I want to know what you’re doing, too.” Most grassroots organizers have a personal connection with the work that they do. Therefore, they want to know that students and faculty are invested in the issue and committed to the project. If a community organization advocates for prison abolition, for example, are students and the instructor knowledgeable about the issue? Incorporating readings on prison abolition into the syllabus may bring clarity and historical context to discussions about social movements and incarceration. Equally effective, though, is relying on the expertise of your community partner: attending public trainings or workshops hosted by the partner can help students learn about the group’s organizing strategies, provide insights about its culture and structure, and promote grassroots knowledge within that community.

Real-Time Syllabi: Adjusting the Learning Objectives

Another important aspect of community-based teaching is adaptability. As faculty develop syllabi, learning objectives, and assignments, they must balance students' desire for specificity with the partner's desire for flexibility. For instance, a syllabus may reference "producing multimedia stories," but, after learning about the community's needs, students may realize that multimedia stories do not help the organization achieve its goals. If students enroll in a course with the expectation that they will learn a skill or review a concept and that does not happen, this can breed resentment and disappointment. On the other hand, course descriptions and syllabi that are too vague may create situations in which students do not know what the class is about and do not enroll.

To illustrate this point, I will review a class that was discussed at a collaborative pedagogy workshop I attended.³ The class was based on a partnership with a community organization that addresses violence in a local neighborhood. The class also included a public exhibition at the end of the semester in which students' projects would be shown to the community. This was intended to amplify the organization's mission and values to broader audiences. The students and professor spent considerable time at the beginning of the semester talking about the ethics of community partnerships and problematizing some of the celebratory rhetoric of community engagement. Students conducted focus groups with community members early in the semester to learn about their experiences with violence. Students then did background research and media analysis about crime and violence prior to moving into production on their final projects. All of this is in line with the relationship building efforts I discussed earlier.

After learning about the community members' experiences with violence, students began scripting stories. The stories were intended to challenge negative stereotypes about violence presented in the media. The students' stories, however, reflected their own experiences with violence, but did not reflect the community members' experiences. The professor told me this put her in an awkward position; she was concerned that the community partner would attend the public exhibition and not feel seen in the students' stories. So, she raised her concerns with the students and asked them how they should proceed. This sparked a brainstorming session that included a healthy discussion about the ethics of representation. The exercise challenged students to think

3 The professor agreed to have her story included in this essay; identifying details have been changed to protect the participants' privacy.

deeply about how narratives are constructed and who has the authority to write and tell certain stories. Although some believed their efforts throughout the semester were wasted, most students viewed the episode as a valuable learning experience. These views were later expressed in the professor's course evaluations: while some wrote that they felt "silenced by the professor," others said they "learned so much from the pivots." Because course evaluations often play a major role in tenure and promotion decisions, administrators must understand that community-based teaching is experimental. The outcomes, therefore, can be uneven and unpredictable. Eventually, the students in the class compromised and created a project that included both students' and community members' perspectives.

In hindsight, the professor told me she would do a few things differently. First, she would be transparent with the students at the beginning of the semester about the unpredictability of community partnerships. This could include co-creating the syllabus and course assignments in real time with the partners. It could also mean using the anecdote from the previous class and asking students how they would have handled the situation. Second, she said she would bring students to the community partners more often, rather than having the partner visit the class on campus. This could help overcome a disconnect between privileged students and communities in the surrounding neighborhoods. Third, she would involve the partners more in the production of the final projects. All of these are great suggestions, but they still raise the issue of resources. Will universities provide community partners with a stipend for their time? Will universities provide faculty support to assist them with scheduling and other logistical issues? These questions, if left unaddressed, could prevent these courses from realizing their full potential.

Conclusion

Higher education is fighting to remain relevant. US politicians for decades have defunded public education, and right-wing activists now chide universities as venues that promote "cancel culture" and "wokeness." Following the COVID-19 pandemic, students' expectations have also shifted. Students are increasingly questioning skyrocketing tuition costs, and many say they appreciate hybrid classes – which provide more time for independent learning and more opportunities to learn and create in various mediums. For universities that claim to value equity and inclusion, community-based teaching is one way to begin rethinking the role of higher education in contemporary society. Grassroots pedagogy creates opportunities for students and faculty to problematize their

assumptions about race, power, and privilege. It also helps educators clarify what it means to engage meaningfully with communities and to promote more inclusive learning environments. Finally, it encourages students to think critically about justice – particularly wealthy students at elite private institutions. When given the proper support and resources, teaching in partnership with communities forces universities to reevaluate their commitment to service and ask: in service to whom?

Grassroots pedagogy is a method through which teachers and students can foster a culture of democracy within and beyond their campuses. Hopefully the lessons shared here will be useful for others who believe that education must be based on respect, accountability, and shared responsibility.

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