

Using Self-Disclosure and Personal Example to Introduce Undergraduate Students to Community Psychology

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A colleague of my mine recently posted his “25 questions” on his Facebook profile, which consisted of twenty-five statements about himself. He is an English professor who stated that he “loves being an activist without having to be an ‘activist’.” That struck a nerve in me because I had been involved in various community-based activities for a number of years before I knew about SCRA or the field of community psychology. It also got me reflecting on my experiences in my own community training, and how I benefited by the shared experiences of my professors in addition to seeing them living their values outside of the classroom.

My community psychology professors impressed me most by the innovative positions they took on complex social problems, and what they disclosed in seminars and office hours based on their personal experiences more so than by what they imparted through lecture material. Like my predecessors, I have found that making some personal disclosures regarding my experiences in addition to putting my values in action outside the classroom can be effective ways of teaching undergraduate students, even introductory psychology students, some of our core values. Thus I offer some of my personal experiences including my pathway to a teaching career, teaching as a community psychologist, considerations related to the process and content of instruction, and being of service as a role model to students to help others who are introducing community psychology to undergraduate students.

My Pathway from Community Work to Teaching

Frankly, I stumbled into my community training. I was initially interested in receiving doctoral level training in clinical psychology for a number of reasons: to extend my clinical training (I had been a masters’ level clinician for some years), to receive the “scientist-practitioner” model of training, and to get direct supervision in the area of research. I was fairly certain that I wanted to pursue a teaching and/or research career, so I applied to a number of clinical psychology programs based on the fit of research interests I had with respective faculty. It’s safe to say that the last thing on my mind was community psychology at the time. However, Leonard Jason emailed me a couple links pertaining to community psychology after my phone interview with him, and after reading about community psychology, I was amazed.

I chose my profession out of the desire to help others, yet I discovered early in my community training that an academic post would enable me to be of help to many others compared to being a direct service provider as a clinician. This occurred at the end of my first quarter of graduate studies when I had the good fortune of attending a pot-luck dinner hosted by local community psychologists who were gathering to discuss the prospect of hosting a second Chicago conference on community psychology. I was highly inspired by the accounts of non-academics who were in attendance, and amazed that these folks were deeply concerned about their communities and CBOs. Their committed efforts toward their communities blew me away, and I

really admired their applied approach to action research. Listening to their experiences prompted me to join SCRA later that evening.

I consider myself to be extremely fortunate for having Lenny as my mentor. He served (and continues to do so) as a guide and role model on several levels. My writing skills were strengthened and my passion for action research increased. Just before I graduated, I earned a few more publications, served as a reviewer for a few journals, and received a job offer by Lenny who persuaded me to work with him in grant writing instead of taking on a highly prestigious post-doctoral, clinical position. Lenny explained that grant writing would better serve me in my pursuit of an academic post, so I gladly accepted his offer despite the very swanky downtown office set-up with full secretarial support. My choice was a bit unconventional for one exiting a clinical doctoral track, but I was more passionate about academia than obtaining licensure.

I easily spent about 50 hours/week working for the Center for Community Research because I was really stoked about my work. I became more involved in research from a grant writing perspective and before I knew it I was serving on an editorial board for a journal. More reviews came my way, and my reading and writing skills increased. I knew I was pretty well prepared for a tier one academic post so I began searching. However, I had to limit my job search because my wife was deeply involved in her professional development as a local artist. This was a challenge because I saw myself as an excellent fit with some posts at very nice out-of-state universities. I left no stone unturned given my relatively small search perimeter, so in addition to university posts in the area, I applied to...er...community colleges: “the kiss of death”, a number of academic psychologists told me.

By spring 2006, I declined two university positions to accept a position at Richard J. Daley College, a community college located on the southwest side of Chicago, Illinois. I found myself at odds with the trajectory that I had been following for the past several years. It didn't make things easier knowing that my colleagues were taking university/research posts. But there was something that felt very real to me at Daley College, and I did think I could continue experiencing the intellectual aspects of community-based research at this new setting. There was something among the faculty and administrators I met during my interviews that excited me about the prospect of teaching. I found myself among dedicated people who were greatly invested in the people they served, and I could clearly see their efforts were aimed toward social justice. They had that sense of duty, mission, and dedication I felt at the second Chicago community psychology conference pot-luck dinner years ago.

Teaching as a Community Psychologist

Daley College is home to many first generation college students, setting it apart from mainstream educational settings. They do not come from affluent families: most live in lower SES neighborhoods and are not college prepped. Most Daley students can be categorized as Latino/a-American, African-American, and literally European American (i.e., recent “white” US immigrants). Many can be considered as being first or second generation Americans in terms of their immigrant status. Now, I am a fourth generation, Anglo-American (i.e., “white”), heterosexual man with a doctorate in clinical psychology with a community emphasis. I'm a published scholar with an area of expertise (substance abuse) based on research, community, and

clinical experiences, including those from the prestigious Johns Hopkins Hospital. What do I have to offer?

Like most of us, the answer is plenty. For instance, my community involvement in terms of both my training and professional experiences have shaped me to become a well-informed educator. I have a number of relevant experiences to offer my students in terms of research and practice; both as a clinical and community psychologist. I think it's very desirable for educators to share "real" field experiences in fleshing out concepts that are discussed in courses. Many of my instructors whose pedagogy had a lasting impression on me were the "doers" who had professional life experiences to share. I believe that community psychology tracks prepare us well because they consist of various applied components that we can share with our students.

Although my professional community-based experiences were quite informative, my subsequent community psychology training emphasized the need for understanding human diversity within the field of community psychology in addition to the broader field of psychology. I had some idea of my sense of racial identity prior to my doctoral studies, yet my limited insights grew as a result of coursework, additional community involvement, and networking with diverse others while completing my program. For instance, I have always been defensive whenever the concept of racism was discussed because I did not want to be stereotyped. I grew up in a very liberal area of Los Angeles during a radical time of modern history and felt very fortunate for the social influences I received in my upbringing in addition to the guidance I received from my Dad regarding race relations. I always took a stand against racial prejudice and fought against it with both my words and fists. I believed firmly that I was quite open minded.

However, I found myself exposed to new ideas in my community training; for example, how race can be conceptualized within a sociopolitical perspective that may offer more understanding of phenomena of interest. My community training provided me with insights into some privileges and responsibilities as a white person with respect to race relations and social justice in the US. I became increasingly aware of my position in my society through others' shared experiences and assigned readings that were critically discussed in a diversity seminar. The point here is that in order for this white-straight-man of the US to approach cultural considerations and issues of human diversity as an educator, I have to show that I have some understanding of my sense of racial standing in my society.

I've found that I can mix personal experiences in addition to my academic understanding of course material when addressing topics of human diversity such as race. I certainly do not take a blaming approach or use this as an opportunity for me to purge any sense of white-guilt. I simply disclose my lack of personal experience with experiencing discriminatory practices when discussing issues related to human diversity. For instance, I inform students that I have to believe my non-white/straight friends' and colleagues' experiences with frequent acts of discrimination because this is something that I do not encounter on a day-to-day basis. I am privileged in this sense and make this known. I find that providing such candor in my classes complements discussion of Alderfer's (1994) position that US psychologists typically fail to critically examine unconscious forms of prejudice in terms of race relations.

For example, I rhetorically posit that if my whiteness (basically) exempts me from most common forms of racial discrimination, how likely would I be to critically examine the relevance of race (or my worldview for that matter) to psychology? If I'm unaware of my position in relation to being a member of a racially dominant group as a white member of US society, then how can I possibly begin to understand the depths of American racism? If I've always viewed race as a nominal variable, why would I be inclined to consider it as anything else, for example, as a matter of identity? If I'm committed to social justice, how can I lecture on these concepts without giving *some* explanation as to how they pertain to me? I have found students are highly receptive to my candid approach. However, I must also state that I sensed some tension among Anglo-American students when using this approach as a part-time instructor at a predominantly white, private university.

Considering Processes and Content of Instruction

My previous counseling training got me focused on two important concepts; process and content. As an educator, these are apt considerations. It is one thing for me to know content material, but being mindful of the process of group dynamics is crucial for delivery. Let's face it; we don't enjoy presentations without good delivery. Likewise, I find myself at times being more mindful of the process in terms of my delivery and timing of content presentation during lectures; and this includes explaining how issues of diversity relate to *my* experiences (and lack thereof). Otherwise, I run the risk of coming across in a condescending manner and lose students' interest. For the most part, this simply involves my candid acknowledgement that I have no real experience with being on the butt-end of oppressive practices on a consistent basis; that I can only glean what it must be like from afar, from my relatively cloistered and safe distance. Like relating my applied (clinical, community and research) experiences to course content legitimizes my role as an educator, I believe disclosing some personal experiences provides additional "real-world" examples. My frankness is usually met with students' disclosures of their experiences. As they provide some of their experiences, *they* help to flesh out concepts (e.g., race, acculturation, assimilation), and in doing so, I sense that it gives students a sense of voice that informs all in addition to promoting a sense of ownership in the class.

In addition to bridging personal experiences to content material, I find that it helps to sequence course topics in a way that reinforces learning and encourages a synthesis of related topics for a "bigger picture" understanding. For instance, I discuss diversity issues and cultural considerations in my introductory courses immediately following lectures on scientific methods; the initial topic of the course that most of my introductory students find as being utterly boring. However, it seems to me that by discussing issues of human diversity after discussing scientific methods, students better grasp the limitations of traditional scientific methodology in addition to seeing how the field is rooted among the worldviews of a narrow class of white male researchers from the US.

I might mention that I find it most interesting to ask students, "Can someone tell me which chapter cultural considerations are discussed," to which a few actually skim through their texts and syllabi only to find that there is no assigned chapter available. My response is that I have yet to find an introductory text that devotes a whole chapter to the subject, and that the field of psychology has considerably more room for improvement. Brief side note: I've never been

completely satisfied with textbooks. In a similar way that our field evolved, I think we need to adopt creative practices instead of relying solely on current systems.

Nonetheless, by addressing issues of diversity, students quickly begin to appreciate the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods, scrutinize sample characteristics and methods in empirical studies, and keep a healthy sense of skepticism toward findings related to comparative analyses; especially cross-cultural comparative studies. I also think it helps to give examples of my own research. For instance, I sometimes share meaningful findings in relation to issues of human diversity in some of my investigations. In addition, I discuss my frustrations with reviewer comments in response to submitted manuscripts where I was directed to omit findings based on sociodemographic characteristics when in fact I found them to be important findings of the investigation (and not just “nuisance” variables).

I do not assign additional readings to my students though I offer to provide complete references upon request. I cite the names of researchers associated with the topics discussed in lectures, which are plainly visible in my PowerPoint slides; many students take note. I borrow quite a bit from *Human Diversity: Perspectives on People in Context* (Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994) in addition to material from investigations and other articles that I was introduced to in my graduate coursework. For the most part, I cover some issues of human diversity (e.g., race, unconscious processes, worldviews, paradigms of diversity, culture, ethnicity, acculturation, assimilation, heterosexism, privilege, western vs. non-western approaches to conceptualization) in my introductory classes. I provide some small group discussion questions to enable students to process and share experiences with material, followed by a class discussion to allow for a greater exchange of thought.

For instance, after providing three specific definitions of “culture,” I have students meet in small groups to discuss which conceptualization they most prefer. After ten minutes, I open up this question to the whole class. In doing so, students explain their positions and provide unique insights into their choices. This seems to promote a personalization of learned material in addition to an exchange of perspectives. However, a common theme that arises among students is that there is no complete agreement on any definition, so I conclude by pointing out the difficulty in designing investigations involving culture simply based on the operationalization of this construct.

In addition, I provide citation for these and other concepts (e.g., access to therapy, language barriers and assessment, client/therapist matches, therapeutic approaches with diverse populations, sexual identity development, adolescent risk factors, prevention interventions, non-professional interventions) discussed in my Child and Abnormal courses. Works involving these concepts can be easily obtained through academic search engines (or previous AJCP issues!). I take great delight whenever mentioning the contributions of community psychologists, and I think I might be creating a buzz among some students in that community psychologists are the ones that are doing the really cool stuff. I frequently point out the contributions made by community psychologists, often times reiterating values (e.g., social action research, social justice, importance of diversity), how our school of thought is extending worldwide, and how I’m only presenting *my* understanding of our discipline within my worldview. Students are definitely awake, grinning, and nodding their heads.

I have little doubt that a number of students “feel me” when I say that community psychologists are like the “red-headed stepchildren” within psychology; because our ideas and efforts toward social justice are not always embraced by others. I also mention that our investigations sometimes are not well received because they suggest systems reform, which is an inherent threat to the status quo. I’m not surprised that these urban, non-mainstream, “southside” students take to such ideas quickly and with keen interest. I sense that they begin to understand difficulties related to reaching a consensus on important constructs (e.g., culture), and that the future is open in terms of extending what we know in terms of human diversity in relation to psychology. In sum, the manner in which I structure my lectures in addition to how I deliver my material seems effective in connecting students to some community psychology topics and values.

I have found that such planning prepares introductory students for a mandatory written assignment: the critique of an empirical article of their choice, due at the fifth week of the semester. Students are specifically directed to discuss in their papers how the topic of their article relates to issues of human diversity, and to discuss how and why the investigator(s) succeeded or failed in addressing these issues. Some students catch on immediately while others need some feedback in the form of written comments in their papers. I do not require “APA” style for two reasons: to avoid confusion with the “MLS” style they’re learning in their English classes, and to encourage emphasis on substance than style. Altogether, I find students develop a critical approach toward appraising psychological research when I coordinate lectures and assignments in a deliberate and timely fashion. I might mention that this approach primes students in viewing psychological material with a discerning eye early on in the semester. Lastly, I’d like to mention that I chose not to emphasize specific instructional strategies per se in this article because they might be limited to my academic context. I encourage others to explore ways to connect students to community psychology concepts/values by relating personal experience, and lack thereof, whenever appropriate. Dare to be creative...as long as you’re being genuine.

Being of Service

Furthermore, I believe it’s equally important for me to carry myself as a community psychologist outside the classroom...aren’t we known for living our values? I must say that I’ve had the great fortune of working with Winifred (Windy) Armstead-Hannah, the only other full-time psychology professor at my campus, who embraces several of our profession’s core values. Although she is not a community psychologist by training, I have found that our values regarding our roles as educators in many respects are highly concordant; and as Jason (1997) has noted, such synergy can result in very positive outcomes.

I meet with Windy throughout the week and we frequently discuss ideas though phone chats when off campus. Together, we’ve worked on a number of projects and generated data to: better understand our students’ learning needs and self-efficacy for education; add a new course to the schedule; offer courses in response to our students’ needs. We have been recently working with publishing representatives in the past year to obtain a high quality, low-cost text for our introductory students; and as a result we’ve identified a most affordable text available to our

students this fall. We feel that this is an important project because the majority of City Colleges of Chicago students' income is at the poverty level. In addition, it's my sense that students appreciate the forms of service we take when our actions have a direct benefit to them. We make a point of informing students of such actions, and this seems to encourage their involvement both inside and outside the classroom, such as in student clubs and organizations.

Two years ago we created an active Psychology Club that engages in several community-based service events throughout the year. Members seem transformed when they involve themselves in these activities as they tend to reinforce the individual's concern for one's community. The efforts of a very strong, student-run organization such as our Psychology Club in the past couple years has had a second order effect in that it bridges students closer to their communities and in some cases provides them with opportunities for internships and paid employment. I frequently announce club meeting times/dates in class and occasionally provide brief reports on individual students who are involved in really neat projects. I think this gives some students the feeling that they, too, can get involved.

In addition, I periodically explain that involvement in student organizations and community projects is part of the entire educational experience; that merely coming to class, writing papers, and taking exams is only a fraction of it. I then encourage students to take full advantage of their tuition costs by becoming more involved in their college experience. We cannot assume that students, even the brightest and most promising ones, know this. I've found that making periodic announcements regarding various student club/organization activities nudges our students who are initially timid and unsure of the potential. However, I must confess that we have an active Director of Student Activities at Daley College, Melvin Anderson, who is most dedicated in helping numerous student organizations thrive. We informally meet quite often, and I find Mel's spirit toward student engagement to be uplifting and good for the soul. It may be worthwhile getting to know those involved with student organizations on your campus.

I mention my involvement with campus and community service during class sessions whenever appropriate because I feel that being of service is more of a way of life instead of an earmarked duty. For instance, I discuss my research findings on self-efficacy for education after reviewing exams because our students typically second-guess themselves in test-taking. I discuss how findings from a recent longitudinal investigation (among Daley students) revealed that increases in confidence in one's abilities to effectively engage in academic behaviors (e.g, test-taking, sharing insights in class discussions, seeking out professors during office hours, etc.) led to better academic outcomes. This research reinforces students' need to become more confident in their academic behaviors. Some students appreciate the fact that findings come from a most representative sample. Many students identify with their need to believe in their newfound abilities and this leads into short discussions on the topic. However, a number of students question why I would involve myself in this capacity when it's clearly something that most instructors are not doing. I simply tell them that my role, like theirs, is not limited to the classroom, and that higher education involves more than merely coming to class. Although our community training can prepare us to make contributions in a number of ways, I believe we need to serve as role models for our students in hopes that they too invest in their experiences *outside* the classroom.

Even though I highly encourage students to visit me during office hours, they probably see me as one who runs around campus between classes and various service committee meetings. I wonder what goes through their minds when their professor in his tie-and-jacket drops what he's doing to accommodate their needs/requests, in both office hours and hallway encounters. Students typically don't understand that *we work for them*, and it warms my heart whenever students realize we're there for them and that they're not "bothering" us, as some might assume. The point here is that some students see their professors as role models, and when they see us as contributing members of our college and community (but not too busy that they can't be approached) they might begin to copy this behavior. This seems evident in the numerous tasks a number of our Psychology Club members take upon themselves, usually for the benefit of others in need such as raising money for autism research and sponsoring toy-drives for several CBOs including a domestic violence program to name a few.

In closing, I have to say that I owe my sense of go-at-it-ness and open door policy to my mentor because he was the role model for me in my training as a community psychologist. Certainly there were others who have made both positive and negative impressions on me, and these learning lessons guide me in attracting students to our field. They have provided me with a wealth of anecdotal information that helps me share our values. I would recommend taking a candid and genuine approach toward incorporating community psychology ideas/values into courses while living them outside the classroom as a way of informing students and attracting them to our field.

References

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