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Sheena Jary

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Bringing to Life “Unrealistic” Ideas: Co-Creating Courses with Undergraduate Students for Radical Change in the Humanities

Sheena Jary
McMaster University

COVID-19 has damaged our learning community. In the wake of pandemic teaching and learning, students and instructors are still building and rebuilding meaningful professional relationships that make the classroom feel more like a community. Outside of the university, COVID has highlighted the social inequities and injustices that characterize Canadian—and more generally, Western—societies. While the university cannot in a single motion solve the social justice issues that deepen inequality, it can play an integral role in initiating an overhaul of society by modeling compassion, collaboration, and inclusivity in educational settings. Change begins in the classroom, but only when the classroom is a space that invites and celebrates radical transformation.

As an educator in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, there has been one idea—one vision for meaningful collaboration—that has kept me motivated through COVID, that is, an opportunity for students to design a course that represents the values, interests, and goals of their cohort. My aspiration is to develop a third-year English and Cultural Studies seminar in which students, in collaboration with their instructor, co-create courses for first-year students. What drives this aspiration is my passion for community building in the classroom, for a healthy, inclusive community is one that embodies compassion and

SHEENA JARY is a McCall MacBain Postdoctoral Fellow in the Office of the Vice-Provost, Teaching and Learning, at McMaster University. She mainly teaches leadership across three academic units, but also teaches seventeenth-century natural philosophy, literature of space, mentoring, and rhetoric.

Sheena was awarded a Partnered Teaching and Learning grant to lead a team of interdisciplinary researchers and course developers to create a concurrent certificate in educational theory and reflective practice—and part of this work is to develop the co-creation course I discuss in “Bringing to Life ‘Unrealistic’ Ideas.”

collaboration. bell hooks explains that, “As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement [for the learning process] is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (*Transgress* 8). Classroom as community is central to my teaching philosophy because, as I tell students, there are always people who will tear us down, but, in our shared space, we have the capacity to build one another up, to encourage and support one another, to promote a culture of care. But an inclusive classroom community needs to embrace the process of decolonization by rethinking how power is distributed in teaching and learning. In the spirit of collaboration and social change, Walidah Imarisha writes, “decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless” (4). If we are to reimagine how we collaborate with students in the classroom, we must first decolonize our own imaginations to avoid passing on processes and ideas that reinforce systemic discrimination and oppression in higher education.

The vision I share resists the practice of “professing” information; instead, I see the instructor as a mentor-coach (see Sharpe and Nishimura), serving as both a source of guidance and a sounding board for students experimenting with new ideas. While I recognize that budgetary constraints in the Humanities may deem this proposal untenable, I lean into a premise advanced by adrienne maree brown and her work on transformative social justice: that “movements for justice vitally need spaces where we start with the question ‘What is the world we want to live in?’ rather than starting with the question, ‘What is a realistic win?’” (“New Inquiry” n.p.). Shutting down ideas as untenable or complicated before they can begin is demoralizing to students and instructors; furthermore, in rejecting ideas that *appear* unrealistic, we may in fact be rejecting solutions to the precarious state of the Humanities. While teaching at McMaster, I have worked with a plethora of students whose strong sense of social justice makes me feel endlessly hopeful for the future of communities in Hamilton and elsewhere. By inviting students to join educators in constructing inclusive and radically new courses, universities are positioned to facilitate the changes that move students—and eventual graduates—toward the world we *want to live in*.

To “profess” knowledge is unidirectional, and it perpetuates what Paulo Freire calls the banking model of education; to co-create, on the other hand, signifies partnership and the decentring of power. As educators, we have the opportunity to share our power with students by engaging

them in course development. Bringing together the collective expertise of educators and the unique lived experiences and interests of a diverse body of undergraduate students would be a fruitful way to share in the co-creation of learning spaces in the university. In *Potlatch at Pedagogy*, Sara Florence Davidson and Robert Davidson remark that, “Formal education can lose its meaning for many students when it does not allow them to imagine themselves in the worlds they inhabit outside of school” (69), a statement that reiterates bell hooks’s call for transformative pedagogy, one that celebrates “teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom” (*Transgress* 12). A transformative pedagogy is one of partnership, reciprocity, and inclusivity. Rather than attempting to enrich students’ education from the perspectives of educators, it is time to give students the freedom to play active, generative roles in rethinking what literary and cultural studies “looks like.”

On the departmental level, I propose a for-credit third-year course for English and Cultural Studies students. By their third year, students have taken a range of courses and, with their own unique insights, are well positioned to create a course that has meaningful intersections between English literature and cultural studies. In the first term, students will practise problem-based learning, embracing the richness of Elder Albert Marshall’s concept of “Two-Eyed Seeing” (see Hatcher et al.); topics would range from community-related issues, cultural issues (for example, issues related to equity, diversity, and inclusion in the university), diverse ways of knowing, holistic learning, and the relationship between language and power. Each topic will constitute a two-week unit, and for each unit students will supplement their learning through selected readings on transformative pedagogy, community building, different ways of knowing, and cultural awareness. Literature is a product of culture, so by combining students’ knowledge born of literary studies, community, and lived experiences, students could mobilize literary texts as models to address cultural issues that extend beyond the space of the university classroom. In the spirit of collaboration, students would be evaluated using the contract method of grading (see Potts); this practice is inclusive and showcases student voices, while also treating students as adults capable of meeting the predetermined standards for their team’s success. As members of a team, students will develop transferable skills, such as managing conflict in a fruitful manner, while also developing a sense of responsibility and accountability to the group and the learning community of which they are a part.

In the second term, students will divide into teams to begin researching a topic, identifying key learning outcomes, creating inclusive assessment strategies, choosing course materials, planning experiential and community-based learning opportunities, and producing a schedule. Naturally, undergraduate students will not be familiar with course development, so their term-two seminars will involve a combination of instruction, discussion, workshopping, and peer feedback sessions. The seminars will build trust between students and professors; it will create space for students to explore topics that spark joy and passion in themselves, while also clearly comprehending the changes they want to see in the world.

An important part of decolonizing the classroom is to rethink the power dynamics of learning communities. Placing the concentration of power in the hands of the educator may have worked in the past, but this is a past that has been historically white, heteronormative, and classist, among other things. Co-creating courses is one way of decentring power in teaching and learning, as is holistic teaching and learning—a philosophy that overtly rejects Western positivism. Holistic learning and different ways of knowing are means of promoting diversity and inclusion by denying the supremacy of Western positivism. Because the academic institution has traditionally valued certain types of knowledge while concurrently devaluing other types of knowledge (for example, lived experience, non-academic skills, hobbies), holistic learning is an important part of the co-creation of courses. It asks students to bring their whole selves into the classroom, into teaching and learning; it also sends a message to students: that their voices, their lives, their ideas are a constitutive part of learning. By teaching students how to build community in the classroom, we are equipping them with skills that they can apply in other communities of which they are a part.

Students will take on leadership roles in curriculum design and decolonization; their ideas for inclusive, relevant, and engaging courses could serve as the cornerstone for academic reform in literary studies and, more generally, the Humanities. Given the state of our discipline, new voices and diverse ways of thinking are precisely what we need to see and hear. While students may not have the experiences and skills of university educators, they do have something of great value to offer in course design, that is, perspectives that are specific to their generation. By partnering, or co-creating, with faculty, students have agency to create a course that transforms how first-year students learn and relate to one another in the classroom space. Importantly, students have the right to know *how* we are teaching them, just as they should have a voice in what (and how) they are

learning. As hooks notes, “When students are fully engaged, professors no longer assume the sole leadership role in the classroom. Instead, the classroom functions more like a cooperative where everyone contributes to make sure all resources are being used, to ensure the optimal learning well-being of everyone” (*Critical* 22). The process of course development will aid the growth of confidence in students, as well as develop critical thinking skills, research skills, interpersonal skills, conflict management, and meta-cognitive skills. Students will also be actively engaged in experiential learning and will gain equity-oriented leadership skills that will act as a foundation for ethical social change, both in and outside the university. “Leadership” can be a vague term that signifies many things, among them neoliberal capitalism;¹ however, students who develop *equity-oriented* leadership skills have the opportunity to redefine leadership in the context of the Humanities. Equity-oriented leaders model compassion, inclusivity, and the self-awareness necessary to understand how their individual actions impact the communities of which they are a part. Equity-oriented leadership skills in the context of the Humanities are not focused on the individual but instead on the collective—on the community.

Without stunting the co-creation process by dictating what sorts of courses students may produce, I would still like to share an example of what the creative process might entail. To begin with, students might be asked to think about course-creation as storytelling. For example, students might brainstorm an issue that is important to their group, perhaps an issue faced by their generation with which their audience (first-year students, faculty members) could engage through the medium of literature. For instance, a group may wish to discuss climate change; with this idea in mind, students may wish to examine the ways that nature has been treated in nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry and short stories. Students may, for example, inquire into the relationship between culture and its portrayal of nature; Ralph Waldo Emerson’s poetry on nature could be brought into dialogue with twenty-first-century Indigenous art and short stories about the importance of land and its relationship with knowledge. By beginning with a core idea about which they feel passionately, students would then develop course learning objectives that appeal to a twenty-first-

1 My comment that “leadership” has become a murky signifier is with respect to misconceptions and/or a lack of awareness of the incredible potential of inclusive, equitable leadership to make positive change, whether at a university or in various communities outside of the university. Often affiliated with business, leadership is a practice that has always belonged in the domain of the Humanities. See Matthew Stewart’s *The Management Myth: Why the Experts Keep Getting it Wrong*.

century audiences. Rather than choosing a specific literary era, students would develop theme-based courses, allowing them to draw on experiences from their other courses. Students would then determine how to assess certain skills and comprehension related to the learning outcomes, but rather than abiding by the traditional methods of assessment students would have the opportunity to ask, “What is an effective and *engaging* way to assess skills and comprehension?” This component of co-creation would require deeper engagement with the professor or teaching assistants, whereas other parts of the co-creation would be predominately student-led. While this example of the co-creative process is brief and perhaps amorphous, my goal is to share a generalized framework within which the co-creative process of course development might be imagined or perhaps altered.

Near the end of the term, students will present their courses at a symposium open both to the university community and the larger, local community. To hear one another’s voices and exchange ideas, to tell stories about what *could become* through collaboration and sharing, and to include community voices as we ideate transformational change in the Humanities classroom, can lead to a beautiful mosaic of possibilities—ones that are hopeful, compassionate, and inclusive—that celebrate diversity and embrace the discomfort that accompanies change. Davidson and Davidson argue that “Learning emerges from strong relationships, authentic experiences, and curiosity. Learning occurs through observation, contribution, and recognizing and encouraging strengths. Learning honours the power of the mind, our history, and our stories” (13), a sentiment that captures the co-creation of courses in the classroom community. The symposium embraces the notion that changes in infrastructure, including that of higher education, should occur when the public is present (25), because the community’s collective knowledge is rich with culture and diversity in experiences.

Bringing these projects to the community continues to build relationships with the social space in which the university is situated. Community buy-in is especially important for courses that address Indigenous literature and culture, as well as other equity-deserving communities. These community discussions could double as a celebration of student collaboration and a forum in which members from various communities could come together to discuss the issues they wish to see addressed. At publicly funded universities, we should be committed to forming even stronger connections with the community. Some of the best ideas may come from those with limited knowledge on how university funding struc-

tures operate, because the idea would be allowed to flourish rather than being discounted as untenable and shut down before it begins.

The symposium will establish a space for discussion on the ways their projects could improve or be actualized through the team's collaboration with a committee of faculty members. One possible outcome could be that, after an audience vote, one project would be developed into a course offered in the department but open to students from across the disciplines. The team that receives the most votes would be compensated for their part in developing a course that would be profitable to the university; one option would be to give each student from the winning team a tuition credit.

hooks tells us that experimenting with pedagogical practices “may not be welcomed by students who often expect us to teach in the manner they are accustomed to” and that “many students confuse a lack of recognizable traditional formality with a lack of seriousness” (*Transgress* 143), but perhaps by bridging the divide between students and instructors by building trusting, professional relationships with students is the means to remedy this problem. Transparency on behalf of instructors is an important part of building community through trust. A project like this would boost morale and has the potential to bridge that divide by bringing together administrators, faculty, and students through a shared vision for transformative pedagogy. Undoubtedly, there will remain power imbalances between the various roles we occupy, but status and authority do not need to preface all our interactions, nor should they discourage undergraduate students from sharing their ideas.

When learning brings people together—even when broaching challenging conversations in the classroom—the opportunities are endless. In my experience, when students know that they are *truly* being heard, they share wonderful insights and visions for how the university or society *could be*. As educators, we are in the position to mobilize these ideas.

Earlier this year, I had my second-year theory and criticism students write calls to action that reflected on, analyzed, and proposed solutions to problems they identified in society and/or in higher education. My proposal—to co-create courses with students and engaging the greater public in the process of transformational change in higher education—is *my* call to action. We will not resurrect the Humanities working alone. Collaborative partnership is the answer—but it must be a *true* partnership with a co-created goal, not simply an empty gesture of “inclusion” or lip service. Together, we can accomplish the mutual goal of showcasing the inherent value of Humanities teaching and learning by sharing the beauty and

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uniqueness of our discipline with the larger university community—and the even greater community in which the university is situated.

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