Bridging the Heart and Mind: Community as a Device For Linking Cognitive and Affective Learning

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Though affective learning or attention to the emotional part of learning has been undervalued in educational systems, it represents a part of learning that is becoming increasingly recognized as vital. How can we bridge the cognitive and affective parts of learning? This article explores Parker Palmer's workable framework for the creation of community in learning environments, accompanied by classroom examples from the author's teaching practices. Community is a place where teachers and students can test ideas and make connections between what they are teaching and learning in their heads and feeling in their hearts.

Introduction

In the best learning environments, there is a space characterized by mutual inquiry, a place where teachers are learners and learners are teachers. The teacher and students can co-create a community for learning where everyone feels valued. Feeling valued represents one piece of affective learning. Researchers have characterized affective learning and its important connection to cognitive learning (Astin, 1985; Goleman, 1998). Bloom's taxonomy included affective learning objectives, which he argued were as central to learning as the cognitive objectives. These objectives begin with receiving (paying attention), and proceed through responding and valuing to organizing (conceptualizing values), culminating in characterizing (generalizing values to behavior). Though affective learning or attention to the emotional part of learning has been undervalued in educational systems, it represents a part of learning that is becoming increasingly recognized as vital.

How can we bridge the cognitive and affective parts of learning? In my current work with teachers in graduate-level education, preservice education courses, and in my own teaching experiences with K-12 students, I have identified a need for community. This assertion grows out of my work, and there is a need for further study to validate this hypothesis. I believe that the behaviors involved in creating a learning community with others stand as the affective part of learning. Without attention to the affective components of learning, the most conducive community for learning cannot be sustained. We need to make connections between cognitive and affective learning in order to create the best teaching and learning environment for our students and for ourselves as educators and lifelong learners. How can we

make these connections transparent in the classroom? Examining good teaching provides an opportunity to investigate these connections.

Affective Elements in Teaching

Good teaching practices by definition center on the teacher as the individual catalyst facilitating dynamic human relationships, which is at the center of authentic educational exchange. Studying the role of the individual teacher and the role of the students in this exchange is of great value. My research shows that learning happens best in community with others. For teachers and students, affective learning is represented by the behaviors and attitudes for creating a community. Studying the underpinning and creation of community may help us to glean understanding of the ways in which affective learning can enhance cognitive learning.

Enter the work of Parker J. Palmer, a writer, teacher, lecturer, and activist. This article will explore Palmer's workable framework for the creation of community in learning environments, accompanied by classroom examples from my teaching practices. Parker Palmer's seminal work *The Courage To Teach* (1998) shed light on the art of community-making when he suggested that a teacher must first be in community with his or her self before he or she can create community with others. A teacher's self-knowledge is a starting point for creating community with one's teaching self. However, there are issues in education that can prevent one form gaining self-knowledge. These include vulnerability, disconnection, and fear. Having taught for over thirty years, Palmer (1998) described his feeling as he started with each new class that he taught, no matter the arsenal of teaching methods he possessed. Instead, he saw his ability to connect with students as paramount. He wrote:

> In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood—and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning. (p. 10)

Palmer pointed out that good teachers not only have the capacity for connectedness, but that they also actively

participate in self-discovery and find interesting and valid ways of joining their inward self with the subject that they are teaching.

Vulnerability

Good teachers create a welcoming space for learning. Though the word vulnerability has some negative connotations, its meaning needs to be qualified for the space of teaching and learning. Palmer (1998) referred to teaching as a constant act of hospitality. This good-natured hospitality is a form of recurring vulnerability; it is an empathy and openness for one's students and their varying needs. Empathy informs the connection between cognitive and affective learning; empathy builds on our own self-awareness and allows us entry into the feelings of others. Goleman (1995) asserted, "The more open we are to our own emotions, the more skilled we will be in reading feelings" (p. 96). Likewise, Palmer's view on good teaching stands as a conscious and repetitive act of openness and vulnerability, which is partly informed by our empathetic capacity. When teachers center themselves in their identity and personal truths, take risks, and allow themselves to be vulnerable, good teaching can happen. If teachers do not make themselves open in these ways, the connectedness is gone and good teaching cannot happen.

When I conduct midterm evaluations with my students, I am allowing my teaching and my teaching self to be vulnerable. These midterm evaluations are not required at my institution. The first time I conducted a midterm evaluation was in the fall of 2003. It was both the hardest and the best thing I did. After collecting the evaluations, I read through them once. Overwhelmed with the feedback, I decided to set them aside for a day or two. The information was not all negative, although the negative comments became "larger" than the others. Good teachers tend to focus and worry about the negative rather than the positive. This is human nature. As caring teachers, we seek to please every student all of the time. We tend to get frustrated when this does not occur. I made some changes in my teaching in response to the information from the midterm evaluation. If I do not open up my teaching practices through these evaluations, I will avoid this vulnerability. However, if I can listen to the voices of my students and be responsive to their educational needs, my vulnerability can be the medium through which I improve the teaching and learning spaces in my classroom.

Disconnection

With regard to both secondary and postsecondary levels, Palmer (1998) emphasized superficial issues that disconnect teachers from their students and colleagues, and summarized the illusions about what it will be like to be a part of that educational culture. Teachers think that by joining academia they will be a part of a community of scholars, but instead find themselves involved in competitive and distant relations with each other. According to Palmer (1998), four issues promote this disconnection: (a) the grading system that separates teachers and students, (b) departments that fragment fields of knowledge, (c) competition that makes students and teachers wary of their peers, and (d) the bureaucracy that puts faculty and administration at odds. The cumulative effect of these issues creates anything but a community of scholars.

So as a possible solution to address these potential disconnections, I decided to investigate my teaching with the help of another educator. In the fall of 2003, I asked my department chair if he would participate in the peer review of my teaching. This was voluntary. I believed it was important to gather some data on my teaching practices in order to improve my pedagogy. Interested in this activity, the chair scheduled times to meet with me. This peer review was conducted in a similar fashion to the method we use to supervise student teachers in the field. We had a series of pre-observation conferences, observations, and post-observation conferences. I asked him to act as a student and give me information on the clarity of my instruction. The data gathered for this peer review gave me another opportunity to gain information about my teaching. In addition, peer review helped me to build community with my department chair.

Peer review has become a valued interaction in higher education because it provides rich opportunities to improve one's pedagogical practices. If I am to open my teaching and learning space to others, I must trust them. In a productive peer review situation, I become another pair of eyes in a colleague's classroom in the name of improving teaching and learning. Rising above the atmosphere of palpable competition, I partner with a colleague to investigate pedagogy. Supporting each other with information and suggestions builds a bridge towards community in higher education, which is a place that can be otherwise isolating.

My background as a K-12 teacher, my experiences supervising student teachers, and my current peer review work with two colleagues supported by the "Teaching Partners" initiative through UMass Dartmouth's Center for Teaching Excellence, all provide a lens for looking at teaching. I focus on reflective practice and the creation of community, and both of these elements feed the best models for peer review.

"I'm glad about the 'inflict no pain' motto," said one of my partners in peer review after I observed one of her classes. She said this during one of our post-observation conferences, and it made me laugh out loud. She was confusing the first law of medicine "Do no harm," which I had learned as the first "law" of supervising student teachers as a doctoral student at the University of Virginia. She had

translated "Do no harm" into "Inflict no pain." I laughed for two reasons: because it was funny and because it reaffirmed to me how vulnerable we all feel when someone else enters our teaching and learning space. This post-observation conversation occurred in a trusted space of community that we have been working to build with each other centering on improving our teaching and our students' learning. This conversation about teaching echoed Palmer's (1998) notions of what kinds of issues cause teachers at all levels to connect and/or disconnect. Palmer characterized both the negative and positive manifestations of vulnerablity in one's teaching. My colleague allowed herself to be vulnerable enough for me to come in and observe one of her classes so that I could give her information about her teaching; she was working to improve her practice and that was positive. This openness or vulnerablity allowed me to help her reach her goals in teaching and thereby improve her students' learning.

Fear

Though Palmer regarded vulnerability, disconnection, and other issues in academe as equally important, he suggested that fear is the overarching reason for all of them. Though many different kinds of fears are involved, not all fears are necessarily negative. For instance, if a teacher is worried about the quality of his or her teaching, this signifies that he or she really cares about the craft of teaching and strives to improve. When teachers complain that students are unreachable, the teachers abdicate responsibility for their students' learning. This creates a separation between teacher and student and frees the teacher from any responsibility for student problems. In addressing this issue of fear, Palmer identified respect as a way to re-connect to others. He believed that academic life could be transformed by practicing simple respect.

> I don't think there are many places where people feel less respect than they do on university campuses. The university is a place where we grant respect only to a few things—to the text, to the expert, to those who win in competition. But we do not grant respect to students, to stumbling and failing. (1998, p. 18)

Respect, an attribute far too often overlooked, is an essential component to all relations in the academic culture. This extends from teacher to student, teacher to teacher, teacher to administrator, and all other possible relations in an educational setting. Respect between and among these stakeholders shows that care is extended and that people's possible successes in learning are considered.

Community as an Antidote to Fear and Disconnection

Another example of community as a bridge between cognitive and affective learning comes from a master's level developmental reading class designed for teachers in the spring of 2004. Creating community was one of my affective learning goals for the course. After grades had been posted and the semester was over, I received an unsolicited e-mail from a student in this class. She commented on how community had evolved in this class and described it in part by explaining, "When students feel like valued professionals they are more inclined to have a vested interest in sharing and learning from one another" (Anonymous, personal communication, May 20, 2004). Because students felt invited to share ideas in the class, she felt comfortable about being open and interactive. Teaching can be characterized as an act of hospitality encouraging a kind of respectful listening and openness, which fosters a rich community for learning. The learning environment in this course was enhanced by the creation of community, thereby connecting the cognitive with the affective.

Models of Community

Palmer (1998) evaluates three models of community: therapeutic, marketing, and civic. The therapeutic model demands intimacy between all members of a community and he emphasizes such a demand is unrealistic. He noted that individuals only attain true intimacy with a few people in our entire lives; expecting a teacher to develop this sort of community with thirty students in nine months is clearly an unattainable goal. Teachers are not trained to be social workers or therapists. Palmer stressed that if community is synonymous with intimacy, then many possibilities will be lost for quality interaction with others who are different from us.

The marketing model of community considers parents and students the customers. Schools must improve their product (education) by strengthening their relations with students and by becoming accountable to them. According to Palmer, "Bill-paying students and parents must be treated as the consumers that they are and given ample opportunity to criticize their purchases" (1998, p. 93). He discounted the workability of the marketing model in today's schools because in our current educational environment, parents and students are not equipped, or in many cases allowed, to be the main evaluators of classroom practices.

Instructor evaluation at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth presents an example of the marketing model of community. Student evaluations of instructors stand as one measure of teaching effectiveness. I strongly believe that student evaluations provide vital information. Students' voices need to be heard because though they may lack some pedagogical knowledge, students are consumers of their educational experience. And as consumers, they can provide important information about the quality of instruction. Student evaluations should not provide the only measure.

Palmer discussed the ways in which the civic model incorporates elements for the best kind of classroom community. The civic model hinges on a mutual agreement to work together towards a common goal. When communities are built on the civic model, a much wider range of relations can exist among people.

> The community envisioned by the civic model is one of public mutuality rather than personal vulnerability—a community where people who do not and cannot experience intimacy with each other nonetheless learn to share a common territory and common resources, to resolve mutual conflicts and mutual problems. (1998, p. 92)

The civic model contains threads for addressing divisions in our society due to differences in race, gender, and ethnicity. Using parts of this model may allow us to begin re-weaving the fabric of our educational institutions that, like the relationships among diverse individuals, have either become frayed or disconnected.

But the commitments of society and the commitments of the classroom are different. In civic society, people solve things through bargaining, negotiation, and compromise. In a democratic society, whoever or whatever receives the highest number of votes leads or is in charge. Palmer explained the difference in goals between the civic society and the classroom, thereby articulating important drawbacks of the civic model for the classroom: "But what is noble in a quest for the common good may be ignoble in a quest for truth: truth is not determined by democratic means" (1998, p. 92). In Palmer's classroom, a fundamental underlying premise of his model is that education must be about uncovering truth.

Community of Truth

Palmer (1998) has created an alternative model for community, which he termed the "community of truth" (p. 90). He intended it to address what he perceived as needed in a teaching and learning space. Though he identified needed components from the therapeutic, marketing, and civic models of community, he stressed that his alternative model is required:

> The hallmark of the community of truth is not psychological intimacy or political civility, or pragmatic accountability, though it does not exclude these virtues. This model of community reaches deeper, into ontology and epistemology—into assumptions about the nature of reality and how we know it—on which all education is built. The hallmark of the community of truth is in its claim that reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it. (p. 95)

He offered no prescription for creating particular communities of truth because different teachers must find their own ways to create it. Rather, he advocated that this making of community must emerge from the identity and integrity of the particular teacher. When the teacher can identify his or her strengths and is in community with themselves, Palmer asserted that the right method will emerge for him or her. Palmer described his community of truth as circular, interactive, and dynamic; it is not hierarchical. It represents an atmosphere that advances our knowledge through conflict, not through competition.

Another Teacher's Example

The feminist pedagogue bell hooks provided an example of a community of truth in her classroom practices. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), hooks described both her view of community and how she engendered community in her teaching and learning space:

> I enter the classroom with the assumption that we must build "community" in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor....I think that a feeling of community creates a sense that there is a shared commitment and a common good that binds us. What we all ideally share is the desire to learn—to receive actively knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully in the world. (p. 40)

By creating her version of a community of truth, hooks' teaching and learning environment attends to the intellectual or cognitive joined with the affective. In turn, living fully in the world and in hooks' classroom represents the dynamic manifestation of the cognitive meeting the affective.

To establish a connection between the affective and the cognitive, teachers need to create a space in which students can integrate what they are feeling and learning. Community is a place where students can test ideas and make connections between what they are learning in their heads and feeling in their hearts. This space allows for reflecting and exploring alternative points of view. Communities for learning exemplify cooperation and help students integrate cognitive and affective knowledge into a learning "whole." Parker Palmer's work represents rich territory for teachers to explore, a place rich with ideas and practices for investigating teaching practices, and improving learning for all students. ◆

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