

Partnership Perspectives



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Sharing Intellectual Authority

Semerit Seanhk-Ka and Sara Axtell

One component of a public scholarship research agenda is the exploration of how community and academic partners come together in “productive and respectful working relationships” (Alter, 2005, p. 482). This paper describes a ten-year journey of coming together to teach a course on community organizing for public health students. A critical aspect of this course is the partnership between the instructors and Healthy Powderhorn, which later became the Powderhorn-Phillips Cultural Wellness Center. The mission of the Center is to unleash the power of citizens to heal themselves and build community. The philosophical cornerstone of the Center’s work is the People’s Theory of Sickness which states that loss of community and loss of culture are the root causes of illness in individuals and decay and violence in communities. The Center addresses health deficits by increasing personal responsibility and group capacity to heal through behavior and lifestyle changes. Participants are guided by elders, teachers and kinship networks of people who know and can relate to the deep cultural ways of healing through a community care giving system (Azzahir & Barbee, 2004)

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In this paper, we describe the evolution of our course, as well as the story of our personal evolutions. Through these stories emerge the principles and practices of sharing intellectual authority in the classroom.

Sara’s Story

As a graduate student in the early 1990’s, I had worked as a campus organizer, creating spaces for students to talk about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other forces that shaped our lives.

I grew to be a part of a close community of mostly lesbian, bisexual, and transgender activists from many different cultural backgrounds. Through these relationships, I learned about the ways that people are privileged and marginalized.

When I finished my degree, I entered a post-doctoral fellowship. My advisor offered me the chance to teach a course on community organizing, building on my work as a student. I accepted. As I developed the course in 1995, I structured it around the concepts that had been vital to my own organizing—privilege, oppression, social location, and alliance. I envisioned us trying to understand our own social locations—the ways in which our identities were privileged or marginalized—and the implications this held for our own organizing. We would study how oppression is institutionalized, and how it affects people’s ability to participate in community initiatives. The class would run the way we had run community meetings, by consensus and as a collective. We would study organizing projects, both through written case studies and through discussions with local organizers, to uncover principles and best practices.

While attending a celebration in the Powderhorn neighborhood, I picked up some materials about a project called Healthy Powderhorn. The project was using a grassroots approach to surface people's concerns about the health of their community. The focus was on developing resources from within the community to respond to these concerns. I wanted to understand, and I wanted my students to understand, the way that the organizers pulled people together, and created a space where people's concerns, resources, and hopes for themselves and their communities could emerge. I phoned the director of the project, Atum Azzahir, and she invited me to bring some students over to talk with her.

Semerit's Story

I was one of the students who first went to meet at Healthy Powderhorn. Born in Haiti, exiled at the age of twelve, and a physician for fifteen years, I had been seeking, for as long as I can remember, a community where I could reconnect to a sense of belonging. The African elders I met at Healthy Powderhorn introduced me to a process of apprenticeship, an immersion in cultural study that would demand submission to cultural authority. In this work, I confronted the fact that my prolonged education in the academic setting had caused an intellectual exile. My work, and even who I was, had become irrelevant in the African community. This sense of irrelevance to my own people represented as serious an alienation as the geographical exile from my home. I became engaged in elder guidance and community building through resurfacing ancient cultural ways and wisdom; this changed the course of my life and work.

A couple of years later, Sara asked whether I would be a guest lecturer in the course to present the Cultural Wellness Center as a case study. I was filled with mixed emotions. I remembered how the feminist-based process of the course meetings—which included circular seating arrangement, check-in of a personal nature at the beginning of the class, and personal journals as the backbone of class assignments—had deeply touched me.

I remembered that, later, I had come to know that the features of the course which gave me a sense of homecoming belonged to my culture's knowledge and practices.

I wanted to help teach this course in which I had felt so at home; yet I was afraid of what would happen to my community's experience in a university setting. My fear stemmed as much from a recognition that the university's spoken and unspoken regulations and attitudes were hostile to my cultural work as from a recognition that, having trained for so many years in that system, I was very vulnerable to its seductive power. I had noticed a chameleon-like change of attitude depending on whether I was surrounded by academic peers or community members. And my community noticed it as well: "you dismissed me, that time when you were with all those doctors," some would say; or, "even your body language is different when you are with them; it hurts my feelings."

It all felt like a huge risk. I doubted my capacity to present our work with the fullness of its value and dignity. I sought the guidance of my elders.

My elders' guidance was: "The work of the Cultural Wellness Center cannot be represented as a case study or example of something defined by another system. You can only present this work if you, yourself, define and articulate the intellectual context within which it exists. It cannot be compared to or contained by the intellectual context of the rest of the course. It must both define and stand on its own intellectual ground."

I did not set out to insist on sharing intellectual authority. However, because I was bound to follow my elders' instruction to establish the intellectual context of the work of the Cultural Wellness Center as autonomous, neither containing nor being contained in that of the overall course, the course then became an implementation of shared intellectual authority.

Early Developments — Semerit

I vividly remember the first presentation of the concept of separate but equal intellectual tracks. I wove around myself a deep cloak of my experience of cultural reconnection. I recounted my journey of building the community I had been seeking since exiled from Haiti. I recounted the journey in the intensely personal and cultural way I had lived it, and was continuing to experience it. Quite unexpectedly, in that presentation, I realized I was being fully myself in an academic setting, for the first time in over twenty years.

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Immersion in cultural story telling casts a certain spell on its audience. There was magic—and the clearly welcomed presence of the Sacred and Ancestral world.

The distance between the two worlds now juxtaposed was great enough to be jarring and to raise many questions, defenses, discomforts and confusion as well as admiration in the minds and reactions of the students.

We had instructed the students to keep the two tracks parallel. It was not until that first presentation that we realized the extent to which we needed to both develop and teach the skills necessary to achieve that goal.

Through countless debriefing and fine-tuning meetings, we endeavored to live the parallel tracks we were teaching. The course structure, the co-teaching interactions and methodology evolved to model the principles and skills outlined at the end of this article. We designed a course with five sessions—as opposed to one—of exposure to the Cultural Wellness Center's curriculum. Students were asked to meet at the Wellness Center for those sessions. And the sessions were taught by a community of several cultural elders rather than by one individual.

But this evolving collaboration would also surface conflicts along the way.

Coming to Maturity — Sara

As the Center's role in the course grew, I began to feel conflict about how the Center defined community—emphasizing culture—and how I had defined community in my own life, which

was cross-cultural and defined by sexual orientation. This was at a time when I was trying to become pregnant, and my partner was planning to adopt the baby so we could raise her together. We felt vulnerable, in some ways at the mercy of the medical and legal systems.

How did the Center regard my life situation? How did they regard others in my community— young queer youth who were homeless, transgendered people who were disregarded, sometimes brutalized?

It was not that I was trying to compare these experiences to the experiences of race we discussed at the Center. It's that I wanted the experiences to somehow register in the minds of those I was working with.

I had created community with people who were creating new places for themselves in their communities, and some whom, to a degree, had been expelled from their communities. It was with these people that I had found a sense of home and belonging.

So, the message that community shouldn't or couldn't be formed in this way seemed to invalidate all that we had been working towards. What was my responsibility to other European-American gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people, and to GLBT people from the African, Latino, Native, Asian communities whom I cared for and who had cared for me? What were the implications for my work at the Center?

Finally, Semerit felt that, in order for us to continue our work together, I needed to immerse myself in the work of the Center, and begin working with Janice Barbee, a European American elder there.

My initial work at the Center focused on GLBT people in the European American community. How do we hold queer people in the community? How do we create a community that people don't feel forced to leave? This was the first time I studied "leaving community" as a cultural pattern. European American people had looked for religious freedom, for land, for economic opportunity by leaving our own people. Is that why I now came to this solution for other problems as well?

As I engaged in this work, I felt less of my energy going into the conflict. Being grounded in my own cultural community released me from seeking a resolution to the conflict. It was not that I found the answers to all my questions about community, but I became more comfortable with living with questions, without having answers.

Being grounded in my own cultural community released me from seeking a resolution to the conflict.

Recognizing the cultural patterns that underlay how I thought about sexual orientation and community sparked a desire to look at the cultural patterns in other aspects of my life. How were my ways of thinking and teaching about community organizing bounded by my cultural assumptions?

When I became an apprentice in the European-American community at the Center, I entered a process of cultural self-study. We asked questions about our people's understandings of the body, of time, of our relationship to the land. Before, all of my self-reflection had focused only on whiteness, and not at all on culture. But before I could share intellectual authority, I had to understand the bounds and the contours of my own cultural knowledge.

I had been educated within an academic system that held itself to be objective, somehow outside of culture. But I began to understand the cultural foundations of the academic knowledge that I worked so hard to attain. And I began to understand that there are other threads of European-American cultural knowledge, from outside of the academy. I learned that in order to be an effective teacher, I have to hold all of these threads of knowledge—what I have learned at the university, what I have learned about whiteness and the experiences of privilege and marginalization, and what I have learned about my own culture.

I came to see part of an answer to my questions about community. Leaving my own cultural community was not a solution—not a way to resolve conflicts about sexual orientation, and not a way to absolve ourselves of whiteness.

The Course Today — Sara and Semerit

Sharing intellectual authority continues to be a journey. We continue to make missteps and corrections. And this evolving journey profoundly impacts not only us, but our students.

In our fifteen week course, a full third of the sessions allow students to sit with elders at the Center. The elders help the students to surface knowledge from within themselves, just as the organizers did in the early days of Healthy Powderhorn.

In their final papers, our students describe their experiences in the course, and what they have learned. Much of what they write mirrors our own work to share authority. They write about discovering and keeping hold of the knowledge of where they are from and who their people are as they progress through the academic system. They write about reconciling with the history of their people, and the implications it holds for their work. They write about going to communities to listen and learn, rather than to bring solutions and save.

The Principles of Sharing Intellectual Authority — Semerit and Sara

Several groups have forwarded principles of good partnerships (e.g., Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 1998; Leiderman, et al., 2003). These principles focus on issues such as shared goals, good communication, and, perhaps most importantly, shared power. To these principles, we would like to add another set of related principles—principles for sharing intellectual authority in partnerships.

We live in a world where academia is the only recognized authority over knowledge and knowledge production. The modern European cultural basis for that approach to knowledge is so all-pervasive it becomes invisible. When we began our co-

When we began our co-teaching, the idea of sharing intellectual authority was foreign in the university setting, and we would have overlooked it if it hadn't been clearly articulated by our elders.

teaching, the idea of sharing intellectual authority was foreign in the university setting, and we would have overlooked it if it hadn't been clearly articulated by our elders.

The philosophy underlying knowledge production at the university cannot be the guiding force in a partnership between university and community, because the university does not acknowledge the knowledge systems that form the fabric of each culture, and thus does not recognize the need for sharing intellectual authority.

The first principles, then, to emerge out of our work are:

Principle 1: Academic knowledge does not exist apart from culture, but itself represents a cultural perspective.

Principle 2: There is a need for the academy to acknowledge other cultural knowledge systems and to recognize that authority over knowledge must be shared.

It was not enough to recognize the need for sharing intellectual authority or to have the sincere intention to do so. We also had to learn how.

Principle 3: Sharing intellectual authority has required that we study our own cultural knowledge systems, as a part of a community and guided by cultural elders.

In order for academics and professionals to be effective in community partnerships, they must be willing to undertake an apprenticeship in their traditional culture. This cultural self-study is just as vital for European Americans as it is for people from other cultural groups.

In this apprenticeship, giving authority to cultural elders creates within the academic or professional a lived internal process of sharing intellectual authority. This internal experience in turn forms the basis from which the transforming professional can then teach what she is practicing.

Principle 4: We need to be able to live with conflict, ambiguity and paradox.

When sharing intellectual authority, there inevitably will be conflict and differences of opinion. But when we are grounded in our own cultural knowledge systems, we do not feel diminished or threatened by those conflicts and are able to go forward with our work.

Putting Principles Into Practice — Sara and Semerit

The principles outlined above required a transformation of the structure of the learning environment:

Practice 1: Class sessions are held both on campus and at the Cultural Wellness Center.

Enough class sessions are held at the Cultural Wellness Center to create a sense of equal importance of each setting as a site of knowledge production.

Practice 2: Setting the stage for parallel intellectual tracks happens at the very first session, when each of us speaks about our perspective.

Each of us speaks with full authority, without preamble or comment from the other.

Practice 3: We don't frame or interpret each other's comments.

Part of my (Sara's) role as a European-American teacher is to model my own process of coming to terms with the harsh realities of the historical relationships between European American people and other peoples. So, I work with students, especially European Americans to debrief from sessions with Cultural Wellness Center teachers. However, I am very careful to help students to process their responses and reactions, but not to re-interpret what the other teachers have said.

Practice 4: We talk explicitly to students about learning to hold multiple perspectives, without placing them into a hierarchy.

At the first session, we discuss the challenges of holding multiple perspectives within an academic culture that urges us to find one "right" or "best" way.

Practice 5: We address European American culture directly.

In a discussion of culture in the United States, it is important to talk directly about European American culture, and to address any misunderstanding among students that culture is something that "other people have." This helps to put European American students on a more equal footing with the rest of the class, so that they are not just in a role of "helper" to other cultural groups, but are themselves cultural beings, living in communities with both problems and resources.

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