Peer Education as a Tool for Relational Poverty Studies

Anisa Jackson & Stella Jones

Introduction:

In our time as undergraduates at the University of Washington, we found immense value in our involvement with the Relational Poverty Network. It has underscored to us the importance of undergraduate involvement in broader research networks, especially in the area of poverty research and action. As students and contributors we have developed our own understandings of relational poverty that have enabled us to pursue interests as future leaders in the field. In particular, we point to peer-education, specifically when linked to a faculty-led course, as a powerful way for undergraduates to extend their involvement in relational poverty education. In sharing our experiences as a teaching resource we hope to illuminate the potentials and challenges of this model and encourage other RPN educators and students to consider adopting it in their own classrooms.

In Winter Quarter 2015 we, along with our partner Koji Pingry, facilitated an optional geography seminar which was open to students enrolled in Victoria Lawson's *Global Poverty and Care* course. The seminar was meant to allow students to reflect on key concepts, deepen understandings of the course themes, and broaden connections between course material and their community service placements[1]. At the time of this seminar, we were all undergraduate students in the geography department who had taken *Global Poverty and Care* in previous years.

This seminar was facilitated previously in 2013 by four upper-level geography students, Sam Nowak, Helen Olson, Jeevon Durke and Jess Wallach. Stella, a first year student at the time, took the seminar and feels it greatly enhanced her learning in the larger course, as well as inspire her future work at UW. Doctor Lawson's course significantly impacted the way all three of us have continued our studies, as well as our actions beyond the classroom. Our shared esteem for *Global Poverty and Care* motivated us to bring the seminar back in 2015.

In this piece, we outline why we think the course-linked, peer-educated seminar is an effective tool for teaching relational poverty and how our pedagogy was informed by principles of relational poverty thought. Ultimately, a linked seminar adds richness to a traditional classroom by encouraging independent learning for both students and peer educators.

In the weeks prior to the seminar, we sat down to imagine what the class would look like, and what role we would take on as peer educators. As we prepared for the seminar, we were inspired by chapters of bell hooks's *Teaching Critical Thinking.* Drawing on bell hooks and our individual experiences in *Global Poverty and Care*, we set out on the pedagogical task of creating a classroom that was a Caring Space, embodying the ideas of Feminist Care Ethics[2] that

[1] As part of their enrollment in the larger course, each student was encouraged to volunteer with a local organization whose work is complementary to course themes.

[2] Feminist Care Ethics is a relational ontology that holds care (both giving and receiving) as central to individual and societal life. Further Reading: Joan Tronto Moral Boundaries.

frame Doctor Lawson's course. As such, themes from *Global Poverty and Care* were present both in the content and the philosophical framings of the seminar.

I. Peer Learning

As peer educators, we did not want to enter the seminar as the authorities of the classroom, but as equal partners. We are still working to un-learn and re-learn poverty knowledge, and did so alongside the seminar participants. This collaborative structure differs from a traditional classroom environment in that we resisted a top-down approach to learning. As upper level students who previously took the larger course and have continued our involvement with the RPN, we do bring a certain type of experience to the group and each participant naturally brings their own unique perspectives and experiences to the group.

This partnership between ourselves and the other students was central to the conceptualization of our seminar. As facilitators, we practiced a democratic leadership style and learned how to build an intentional learning community. Further, through their weekly written reflections and participant-facilitations, seminar participants continually shared experiences from their own lives and guided the class in ways that added complexity and nuance to our own understandings of poverty and care. For example, a student from Japan shared how neoliberal policies and attitudes were playing out in her home country. Another student spoke of her involvement in faith-based organizations in the U-District that we were previously unfamiliar with.

The partnership between ourselves and the students provided an alternative to the traditional power hierarchies and conceptualizations of expert knowledge of the classroom. For students new to Relational Poverty Studies, the seminar offered a space to dig deeper into course material and review difficult concepts in a space that facilitated vulnerability and in which they had partial ownership over proceedings. Upper level students practice facilitation and leadership skills, while also furthering their own understandings of relational poverty. When linked with a traditional lecture style course, a peer-learning seminar may address some of the limitations of the larger course, while also gaining structure and guidance from it. The larger course gave seminar participants challenging concepts to struggle with, a general outline of study, and a common foundation for discussion. This makes a peer-educated seminar linked to a lecture-based course a particularly compelling pairing.

One challenge we encountered with this model was our desire for both a democratic space and a narrative that is in keeping with the learning objectives of the larger class. While we explicitly sought novel input and direction from the seminar participants, we also entered the seminar with some existing goals for the participants and for ourselves. Principally, our goal was to encourage students to question dominant understandings of poverty and inequality while engaging in critical and relational thought. With this goal, we had to be conscious of how much we directed or re-directed the group conversations. We wanted to allow space for participants to learn from each other and have ownership over the space. However, sometimes we felt the need

to speak up more, especially in response to untroubled conclusions about who is poor and why. We did notice that by the latter weeks of seminar, we were able to take a more hands-off approach as students became more practiced at relational and care-ethical engagement.

As a group we worked together to practice critical and relational thinking in order to question what we thought we knew about poverty and inequality. This often resulted in dramatic changes in the way each individual approached these issues (as evidenced via written weekly reflections and our seminar discussions). These changes are not simply internal, but they affect the way students go on to relate to the world. In fact, during our last meeting of the seminar, students requested time to consult each other on how to continue engaging in relational poverty thought and action after the term ended. As a group we discussed capital-P Politics vs small-scale politics; how students might talk to their families about relational poverty at the dinner table, the intersections between relational poverty knowledge and participatory action research, and how to act as allies for people experiencing poverty.

II. A Care Ethical Learning Community

Interrogating dominant understandings of poverty often involves taking a critical look at the ways we as individuals embody those understandings. We sought to create a community where students were challenged to problematize some of their own ways of viewing the world while feeling supported and confident in their unique ways of undertaking this process. To accomplish this goal we returned again to the core concepts of the larger course, specifically Feminist Care Ethics. In conceptualization and practice, this seminar was an act of care. This type of collaborative learning becomes possible when each participant cares for the others and their learning. A caring community is also free of judgment[2].

Yet, this is not to say that a caring community is free of conflict or disagreement. Often, learning environments that aim to be safe spaces attempt to silence disagreement on sensitive topics. We agree with many others that this articulation of safe space is counterproductive, that disagreement is inevitable when discussing complex issues. However, we still believe that the theory of safe learning communities is positive. Indeed, bell hooks has made this distinction, "if we rather think of safety as knowing how to cope in situations of risk, then we open up the possibility that we can be safe even in situations where there is a disagreement and even conflict" (hooks 2010: 87).

Learning communities can be both safe and *brave* spaces. Brave spaces expand on the notion of safe spaces, while acknowledging inherent situations of risk, vulnerability and potentially conflict (hooks 2010; Landerman 2013). Brave spaces emphasize both courage and care.

In a care ethical learning community (and a brave space) you have to extend care, and trust that others will extend care in return. hooks also emphasizes the importance of trust where dialectical exchange is a goal, as with our seminar. In her words, "To trust means having

[2] "Where there is judgment there is no care" -Jess Wallach (co-facilitator of the original seminar)

confidence in one's own and another person's ability to take care, to be mindful of one another's well-being," The trust each participant had for each member as vital contributors to the group's learning, "Choosing to trust, to be mindful, requires that we think carefully about what we say and how we say it, considering as well the impact of our words on fellow listeners." While care ethical learning environments can present risks or require vulnerability and bravery, students should feel safe (although not always comfortable) and supported as they are learning.

This tension was brought into focus a few times during the quarter. There was one instance where the group was discussing the politics of care work abroad and one student offered her hesitations about an upcoming mission trip to a South American country with her church. She was visibly frustrated and discussed how her previous knowledge of service learning was being challenged by the course material and discussions. She was met with supportive reception by the group and was given a space to think through her feelings of confliction in a space that was free of judgment as we talked about ways to be critical without feeling paralyzed. This was a moment where we were able to grasp the sense of community that the students were able to create for one another and understand how care ethics applies to an educational setting.

Conclusion:

Our efforts to cultivate a care ethical learning environment began when we first sat down to discuss our approach to the seminar and our role as peer educators. These efforts advance as we gather feedback on the seminar, further develop our own facilitation skills, and continue to engage with relational poverty knowledge. As former students of Professor Lawson, our experiences in *Global Poverty and Care* were foundational to the structure of the seminar.

Our seminar worked within these framings and was enhanced by the caring and democratic qualities of our peer learning environment. We believe this construction of community facilitates a type of learning that can move beyond the classroom. Over the seminar's 10 weeks we have seen how the 331 students and ourselves have begun to engage the world in different ways. Matching the framework of a course-linked seminar with an intentional and caring pedagogy helped make this endeavor a positive experience for all involved.

In outlining our thoughts behind the structure and pedagogy of our seminar, we hope to encourage other students and educators to adopt this model in their own classrooms. A course linked seminar is especially well suited for courses that center issues pertaining to relational poverty as many of the same epistemic framings can be included in the course design. All of the students, both those acting as participants and as facilitators, were given the space to work through both the material from the larger course and through the more personal, affective labor required to engage with relational poverty knowledge.

References:

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