Belonging in the Classroom is Not the Same as Belonging in a Course: Inclusivity Through Assessments

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I used to think belonging in the classroom referred solely to how students felt; I didn't consider how the individual belongingness of each student could be integrated into the course structure. With critical restructuring, I was able to weave my students' communities and identities into a foundational aspect of the course: the assessments. Furthermore, since we test on what is most important, integrating student identities and backgrounds into assessments enabled me to emphasize that students belonged in the course and that their knowledge and ways of knowing also belonged.

In 2017, I worked with a student pedagogical partner to incorporate group work and in-class activities into my large Child Development course. Together, we created pods based on students' intersectional identities (e.g., ethnicity, gender identity, class, first-generation status) so that no student would be "the only one" in their group. That is, they would belong. As I was pre-tenure and worried about the repercussions of creating groups based on intersectional identities, the pedagogical partner provided me with weekly feedback about the mini-lectures and activities in which students engaged, as well as pod functioning. Overall, the pods were successful, and students reported feeling connected to their pod and feeling included in the class without me having to modify my entire course. I could leave my 'traditional assessments'- multiple-choice tests with short answers and essays, critical papers, quizzes, and a scripted child observation project- intact.

I thought I had succeeded in fostering student belongingness because my students saw themselves reflected in their class activities and their carefully selected pods. However, students

don't only belong in the classroom; their lived experiences belong in the very fabric of the course itself, which I had not revised. In sum, all students belonged in my classroom, but only some, those with a Eurocentric view of knowledge, belonged in my course due to my traditional assessments.

The form and content of my course assessments were influenced by my Funds of Knowledge, which refer to academic and personal knowledge, life experiences, skills used in daily social situations, and worldviews shaped by historical and political forces (Rodriquez, 2011). As a white cis-female middle-class Kansan, my assessments were drawing on Eurocentric epistemologies- the primacy of the written English language, experiences of knowledge as 'individual,' knowledge as objective and a search for truth, and of course, positivism, universalism, and rationalism (Paton et al., 2020). My experiences, rather than my students', reflected what students should know and how they should know it, which was belonging on my terms.

When COVID forced us to learn remotely, my students were simultaneously in my class and in their homes/communities. In this context, they were undeniably my students but also daughters, sons, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, grandchildren, and cousins. I now had to consider how to bring my child development course and its content into my students' home communities while allowing my students to bring their communities into my course.

Instead of asking the students to take timed tests, which reinforced Eurocentric ways of knowing, I invited them to share their learning with families or housemates through small interactive assignments. Students worked (on Zoom) to share these experiences and reflections in their pods- complicating the view of development presented within the readings and my perception of my students. I became highly conscious of students' familial routines and knowledge. The classroom no longer consisted of individual students but instead of families and community members; their distinct cultures, routines, and practices were present in the classroom.

Students enjoyed bringing the course content to their communities and their communities into the content. For example, small assignments, such as conversing with a relative or another adult about important child attributes and what they hoped the child would become, centered our conversations about temperament and goodness of fit in a real-world context. Post-Covid, I wondered if there was a way to continue bringing their communities and experiences into the content and assessments. I drew on sociocultural pedagogical theory (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) in conjunction with Funds of Knowledge to help me rethink how I center students and their whole belonging (not only self but family and community) by examining my assessment practices.

In the end, I adapted all of my formal assessments to center student ways of knowing and knowledge and to provide opportunities for students to bring their own lives and their community knowledges into the assessments. That is, I began to utilize my students' Funds of Knowledge to create a variety of assessments that would reinforce that they belonged to the course and its learning outcomes. I should note that not all students' Funds of Knowledge are positive; students share "dark knowledge" (Zipin, 2009) such as how racism, discrimination, or economic status, influenced their development and their community's development. Including all Funds of Knowledge, the positive and the dark, is vital for students to belong.

For example, I created a weekly, low-stakes "learning log." This formal assessment provides opportunities for students to interact with the course content in a variety of ways, including discussing content with friends, asking students to interview family or community members, or expressing learning in forms other than written language. It also provided opportunities for students to critique the course content or provide alternate experiences that may reflect dark knowledge.

I adapted the child observation assignment to something that I called, "Selves on the Shelves," a child development-based research project where students choose a research question or topic reflecting their lived experiences (and may not be included in the textbook) and

conduct it using interviews, reflections, questionnaires, documents, and storytelling in order to utilize their ways of knowing and transacting knowledge not just knowledge content (Zipin, 2009). They write this as a traditional paper or a children's book.

In child development, an objective, empirical approach that allows for generalizations is often touted as the only way. However, by legitimizing personal experiences and family knowledge and dismantling "objectivity," students could see that their Funds of Knowledge contributed to the co-construction of knowledge. Students belong in the classroom, and they, their families, and their communities also belong in the content.

References

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