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photo essay

Beyond Walls: Reconfiguring the Classroom for Active Learning

PEARL CHAOZON BAUER AND JENNIFER M. MURPHY

The first time I walked into the class, I immediately noticed the rugs and like I guess you could say the crazy looking puppets.... I honestly am really thankful for experiencing new things because it helped me widen my perspective in what life can be defined as when we went to the chapel and we were basically going through like music meditation, or when we all volunteered in community service.

Student reflection, December 2018

In the fall of 2018, we co-designed and co-facilitated a student-driven freshman seminar on mindfulness and meditation, weaving together inquiry-based and experiential learning to promote self-discovery and social transformation within an intentional community. In this seminar students explored different meditative practices by analyzing scientific research and by experiencing meditation and mindfulness themselves. As the above student reflection underscores, this photo essay illustrates how, with minimal resources and support, we dared to conceive a classroom that not only eschewed traditional rows, desks, and tables but also utilized communal spaces beyond the four walls of a traditional classroom. In this way we reimagined our notion of the experiential learning classroom to create a freshman seminar that supported active and engaged learning.

Reconfiguring the physical classroom invited students to reexamine their relationship to learning from being passive recipients of knowledge to becoming active agents in their education. Because our university lacked funds, we sought assistance from Philanthropic Ventures Foundation and received \$1,400 to purchase meditation cushions and yoga mats. The new configuration enabled twenty students and two facilitators to sit on the floor facing each

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other on meditation cushions, yoga mats, or in a chair or wheelchair. Many of our students were first generation and racially minoritized, with histories of antagonistic relationships with teachers, school, and the classroom itself, and this step away from a hierarchical top-down approach to teaching enabled students to embrace new ways of learning.

Even though this transition was uncomfortable for some at first, the supportive nature of the class eased them through the transition quite naturally. When we welcomed students to the learning space on the first day, we encouraged them to join us in taking an active role in building the class, not only physically (for example, by putting together meditation chairs) but also intellectually (by developing a classroom culture through discussions of what to invite into our collective space). By the end of the three-hour seminar, the apprehension they showed upon first entering the classroom had dissolved. For the rest of the semester, the students bravely participated in active discussion, writing, and reflection. With meditative practices, we cultivated trust, dignity, respect, openness, vulnerability, transparency, honesty, and imagination. Our approach to mindfulness encouraged listening from the heart, critical engagement, and a commitment to each other without flattening structural, social, political, and historical power relationships. The space allowed different kinds of meditation practitioners to help deepen the students' understanding of meditation as a commitment to personal transformation and social justice actions.

After fifteen weeks, we realized that our class helped first-year students bond in transformative ways. The space itself supported the students to be less inhibited and to be unafraid to ask questions and ask for help because there was freedom to acknowledge mistakes and fears without judgment. The students had greater success, which was reflected in their final grades and self-assessment, and, more importantly, in their increased confidence and sense of belonging in higher education. They were committed to holistic learning, not for the grade but for themselves.

The photographs below are snapshots of our journey. They capture moments of the co-creation of space, knowledge, and community. While the seminar topic supports this learning reconfiguration, it could be borrowed, adjusted, and adapted across disciplines for virtually any discussion-based seminar.



Figure 1 NDNU has limited classroom space: large classrooms house lecture-based classes rather than seminars. We pushed to procure a classroom big enough to hold our vision. We then moved the desks and chairs to the back of the room and reconfigured the space so that students would face each other.



Figure 2

We utilized multiple objects for active learning to encourage critical engagement and openness. For example, the elephant puppet represents active listening while the giraffe and wolf facilitate nonviolent communication. Students requested the 8-ball when they were ready to share with the group.



Figure 3

The facilitators prepared yoga mats for experiential learning while providing students with sitting choices (meditation chairs, yoga mats, or a combination of the two). Students with disabilities could sit in chairs or in wheelchairs.

Figure 4

The co-creation of space began on the first day when the group assembled the meditation chairs together. These activities helped build trust and gave students a sense of ownership and responsibility as they formed the space.



Figure 5

Many of our students are first generation and racially minoritized, so we dedicated significant time talking about school experiences and the environment we wanted to cultivate. Agreed-upon values and guidelines helped create a dynamic, democratic, intentional, and active classroom that fostered commitment, accountability, and love of learning.



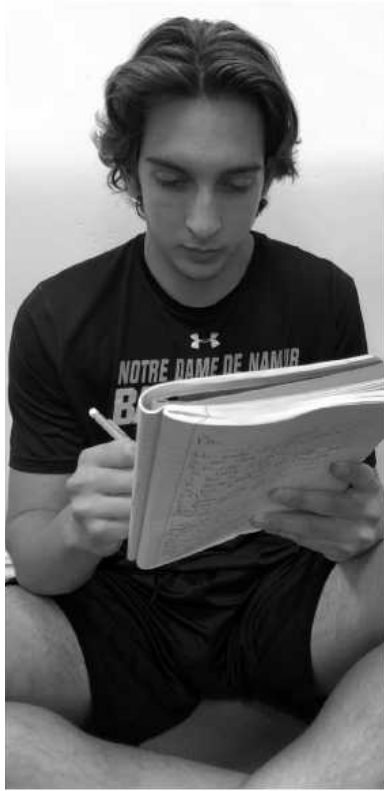


Figure 6

Students requested active writing time to gather their thoughts before participating in a bigger group discussion. Pedagogical practices like active listening, writing, pair work, discussion, and reflection encouraged students to shift from passive to active learners.



Figure 7

A gallery walk assisted students in teaching and answering their peer questions about mindfulness modalities they had researched and presented. Motivated by collective learning and responsibility, students gained confidence and developed their own talents for meaningful growth, reflection, and self-transformation.

Figure 8

Gathering in the chapel, students sang in small groups with Josiah Johnson, the co-founding member of the band The Head and the Heart. Through finding their voices individually and together, with Johnson's help, students tapped into the power of music for group and personal empowerment.



Figure 9

We moved the class to Taube Community Center for Jiwon Chung's visit. With him, students practiced theater as a tool for social and political change to challenge, resist, and transform systemic oppression. Every student bravely accepted this experiential challenge to explore structural violence and its effects on interpersonal relationships.





Figure 10 Leaving campus, our class traveled to Coyote Point Beach to heed the call to action to help preserve the coastal ecosystem. Through all of these experiences within and beyond the classroom, we became active learners and accepted responsibility as agents of social community change.