Community, Challenge, and Chances Can Create Conscious Education

“I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study.” This is Cornell University’s mantra, spoken by its co-founder Ezra Cornell. This mantra has set Cornell aside from the institutions before it, and even some after its founding. This mantra attracted me to Cornell, and guided me through my time at Cornell. I carried this mantra into my Education minor in the hopes of fostering that same idea within my interactions in my classes, internships, and fieldwork projects. Through carrying this mantra with me into these spaces, I realized that there are certain characteristics associated with institutions of learning that speak to this mantra. Effective learning spaces create communities around pupils, challenge normative thinking, and promote chances over consequences.

In many institutions of learning, students are expected to “leave themselves at the door.” Or to quote bell hooks, “many students are socialized to think that bringing in one’s whole self to the classroom is a detriment to the classroom and that our classroom selves should be one dimensionally orientated at the subject at hand.” (hooks, 1994) Through this, students are expected to leave all the baggage they carry with them from their home lives outside of the classroom. However, bell hooks speaks of Thich Nhat Hanh referring to teachers as healers: “individuals who sought to promote the overall well-being of the unified individual.” (hooks, 1994) It is nearly impossible to leave yourself at the door. Thus, effective educators ensure that students feel secure, acknowledged, and supported by creating communities around their lives.

Creating communities around pupils has been a part of my educational philosophy since I had to create one in the Art of Teaching, as a wee Education minor, and since I needed to flesh it out further in Educational Psychology. Characteristics of communities are safety, networks of support, and nourishment. These characteristics should already exist in a classroom, therefore making it easier to create communities within classrooms. A good way to establish a community within a classroom, is to form one around identity. When students can see themselves in the classroom, in the material being taught or simply in images along the walls, they are more likely to feel secure within the community and grow as a result.

For example, when a professor for one of the core classes for the education minor stands in the front of the classroom and says that students from schools with metal detectors would not be at Cornell, I did not feel welcomed into the community being created in that classroom. My experiences in high school were not only discounted, they were erased from the conversation because there was no way I could even be sitting in that chair, in that classroom, at Cornell. With the lack of acknowledgment, the feeling of security also went out the window. And when the same educator is telling the class about the location of her office and proceeds to say that there is nothing important in the building in which her office is located, all feelings of support also went out the window. However, I must admit that the comment was made in a joking manner. On the other hand, with the first comment in mind, and considering all the departments inside of the Computing and Communication Center (CCC) that are of the utmost importance to me, I did not feel the joke.
It’s not a joke when the departments in that building—OADI, the Learning Strategies center, and now the Intergroup Dialogue Project—have supported my entire Cornell career.

I have been asked to do so, so many times before, but I cannot leave myself at the door when I enter a classroom. The example provided is an antithesis of a community that promotes security, acknowledgment and support, because I have so many more examples of instances in which I was kept outside of a community due to comments made that no one else raised an eyebrow towards. Creating communities within classrooms has consistently been a part of my educational philosophy because I don’t want students of tomorrow to feel otherized in another learning environment.

After I leave Cornell, I plan on volunteering at the Children’s Museum in my hometown. During this volunteership I will help create a nurturing, supportive community by ensuring that the children under my care feel acknowledged. I will not only listen to their stories and their problems, but also genuinely respond to them. I will help them create connections with other kids, and revisit topics we once talked about in the past. Through these actions, it is my hope that the children of the Children’s Museum feel that they do have a secure community at the museum. It is also my hope that my actions will make the kids feel more comfortable being their entire selves in environments outside of the Children’s museum.

Educators must ensure that the environments within their classrooms do not promote singular experiences, which can be done by creating communities around identities. Students cannot leave parts of themselves at the door, and become one dimensional upon entrance into a classroom. Every student carries with them their experiences and brings that aspect of them into the classroom. To ignore that critical component of any student is to ignore the way any one student experiences the learning process. “Diversity is essential to move the system beyond industrial models of standardization and conformity.” (Robinson, 2001, p. 141) In other words, “any student, any study” will keep Cornell challenging normative ways of thinking.

Educational spaces are meant to challenge normative thinking by diminishing ignorance. As Will Durant said, “education is the progressive discovery of our own ignorance.” Therefore, in order to be prepared for new ways of thinking and action, institutions of learning need to challenge normative thinking.

When I facilitated the Intergroup Dialogue Project (IDP), I did not expect to gain much from the experience. I was the target facilitator in a race dialogue, and the only Black woman in the class. So, I really did not have high expectations for how much I was going to get out of the experience as compared to everyone else. In a way, I was right and wrong. I was right because not a lot of learning occurred on my end. I was wrong because important ideologies were challenged on my end, which left me more neutral than right or left on a controversy.

For example, when the topic of Rachel Dolezal arose during our dialogue, I only had one opinion on it. Dolezal portrayed a certain level of privilege when she decided to be Black that is not open to everyone. Simply, Black people cannot decide to be White. However, a student challenged that way of thinking. Why couldn’t Black people be White, he asked. It took more than that question to change my position on the controversy, but that question sparked all of the doubt I later developed.
Educational spaces are meant to challenge normative thinking. The liberal and the conservative need to be in the seminar course together to challenge each other’s ideologies. If normative thinking were not challenged, women would not be able to vote, America would not have elected its first Black president, and I would still be a slave. Educational spaces diminish ignorance and allow for communities to be created around a plethora of identities, instead of one singular experience.

Again, when I facilitated IDP, my co-facilitator identified as lesbian, unbeknownst to me. When she heard me using partner to refer to my significant other she mentioned to me how comfortable it made her feel. That singular action facilitated the growth of our community within the class. And I will continue to take small actions like these to ensure that other identities are normalized in spaces I inhabit, so that numerous identities will be represented in communities I am a part of. More specifically, I will also continue to challenge gender binary bathrooms, and advocate for a singular gender neutral facility in all public buildings. And, when I enter the work force, I will ensure that I challenge normative thinking by asking for preferred gender pronouns in the work place.

Normative thinking is something I work hard not to do. I try not to use gendered pronouns when referring to babies, I challenge my racial biases, and, although I am in a heterosexual relationship, I refer to my significant other as my partner in regular conversation. But of course, like any social justice warrior, I was not always like this. When trying to challenge the status quo, mistakes will be made due to ignorance. But it is important to realize that mistakes do not need to result in character defamation. Numerous mistakes are made in educational settings, mistakes that can be difficult to recover from. This can result in many students not trying before they can even make a mistake, or many students having anxiety over behavioral mistakes. However, when educators give more second chances and fewer consequences, students are more likely to be more comfortable making mistakes and learning from their mistakes.

I experienced one of the most frustrating and tiring summers of my life during the summer that I worked as a camp counselor. I was not frustrated and tired because the food was bad, or I had no cell phone service, or I only got 4 hours of sleep every night. No. I was frustrated and tired because this summer camp did not believe in consequences or repercussions for bad behavior. Every incident was a learning moment, and every camper got a second, third, fourth, and sixteenth chance to get it right. This was a new concept for me. In a time where many students are afraid of this country’s police state, and zero tolerance policies are criminalizing our youth, it is difficult protecting the innocence of today’s youth. That innocence comes with so many mistakes as a result of young ignorance and immaturity. And a lot of those mistakes are not forgiven, rather they are attached to the kid for life, and leave a permanent mark how the kid is received by the world.

So, when the kids arrived to camp, they received second chances to get things right for when they went back home to an unforgiving world. For example, when one student hits another student in school, the usual course of action is suspension from school, which does not help any learning process. But that was not the case at this camp. When one of my campers hit another one of my campers, I could not send them home. I needed to think of way of that would make them both feel acknowledged and safe in our camp community, and a way to ensure that they grew beyond this incident.

I first decided to sit them both down in front of each to explain to me what led to the physical altercation. I let them decide who was going to speak first, and I made it clear that there
would be no interruptions. At the end of their explanations I asked one simple question: how could this have been handled differently? And each camper spoke of different courses of action each of them could have taken to avoid the physical altercation. Afterwards, I asked them to write down how they were feeling in the moment. I told them I would collect what they wrote, and visit them before lights out to have them write how they were feeling then. Once they finished writing, I let them both go back playing. Later that night, after they finished writing down their feelings again, I let them read what they wrote. When they wrote down their feelings later that night, they were tired, happy, and the altercation did not even come to mind. The purpose of this was to show them how temporary the emotions that led the physical altercation were, and how they could have permanent consequences in other environments.

Many mistakes in schools can lead to permanent consequences, like suspension, expulsion, detention homes, and all around embarrassment, which can lead to increases in anxiety, depressive symptoms, and suicide rates. In an unforgiving world, classrooms are meant to provide security, networks of support, and acknowledgment for students. Communities surround their members and provide learning moments instead of consequences. If classrooms are to act as communities and education is meant to diminish ignorance, students need to have more chances and fewer consequences for actions that are the result of ignorance.

I carry Cornell’s mantra with me into educational settings because it contains the three insights I have outlined above. “Any student, any study,” means communities will be created to help those students succeed. “Any student, any study,” means ignorance will be diminished, and normative thinking will be challenged by new ideas and actions. “Any student, any study,” means there will be an atmosphere of wrong and right decisions, and the opportunity to correct the wrong decisions. “Any student, any study,” means community, challenge, and chances can create conscious education.
Works Cited
