

Using popular education with health promotion students in the USA

Noelle Wiggins^{1,2,*} and Amara Pérez³

¹Multnomah County Health Department, Community Capacitation Center, Portland, OR, USA, ²School of Public Health, Portland State University, Portland, OR, USA, and ³Educational Studies, Cultural Foundations, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, USA

*Corresponding author. E-mail: ninanoelia@msn.com

Summary

Recent publications have called for new approaches to training the next generation of health promotion professionals, for whom effective practice depends on understanding how systemic inequities are created and function and how they can be dismantled. These approaches gain particular urgency in the context of recent trends toward commodification of knowledge at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. Popular education, a liberatory pedagogy, has been used in social movements around the world for decades. In a health promotion context, its use has been associated with increased empowerment and improved health. To explore the potential of popular education (PE) for helping health promotion students develop a systemic analysis of power and privilege and the concrete skills needed to address health and social inequities, we conducted a case study in the context of a community organizing class in a Master's in Public Health curriculum. Analysis of mixed methods data collected from students suggested that PE, with its focus on concrete practices and interactions, is a valid alternative to conventional pedagogy and a useful complement to liberatory pedagogies more common in university classrooms. Application of PE in higher education will require overcoming barriers, including student resistance and institutional pressures that discourage its use.

Key words: inequalities in health, qualitative methods, transformative education, university students

INTRODUCTION

Recent publications have called for new approaches to training the next generation of health promotion professionals, for whom effective practice depends on understanding how systemic inequities are created and function and how they can be dismantled (Chavez *et al.*, 2006; Cushman *et al.*, 2015). In light of trends like high stakes testing in primary and secondary schools, increasing emphasis on preparing students to compete in the marketplace and disparate matriculation and graduation rates for university students from marginalized communities, there is a

need to help health promotion students develop capacities for collective critical thinking and action, while simultaneously leveling the playing field between students from dominant and non-dominant cultures. Some authors have even suggested that a 'paradigm shift in teaching methods and classroom philosophies' is required [(Chavez *et al.*, 2006), p. 1175].

Critical pedagogy has been presented as an approach to interrupt the transmission of unjust societal values and norms and develop critical consciousness (Darder *et al.*, 2003). However, critical pedagogy has been assailed

on numerous fronts: for telling practitioners what to do without telling them how to do it (Gore, 1993), for ignoring ‘historical context and political position’ [(Ellsworth, 1989), p. 298] and even for perpetuating relations of domination in the classroom (Choules, 2007). Feminist post-structural pedagogy has tended to focus more on relations within the classroom, but its application outside the disciplines that produced it has been limited (Falk-Rafael *et al.*, 2004).

Popular education, a philosophy and methodology that creates settings in which people most affected by inequities can identify problems and underlying causes and develop solutions, has been a cornerstone of social movements around the world for decades. While strongly influenced by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1973, 2003), popular education (PE) predates Freire and has continued to develop since his death in 1997. Popular education has been widely used for health promotion, where it has been associated with increased empowerment and improved health (Wallerstein, 2006; Wiggins, 2012). A few recent studies have systematically compared PE to conventional education as methods for increasing knowledge and empowerment, with hopeful results (Wang *et al.*, 2011; Wiggins *et al.*, 2014).

In the spring of 2011, we co-taught PHE 517, ‘Community Organizing for Health,’ a required course for students in the Health Promotion track of the Master’s in Public Health (MPH) degree at Portland State University (PSU) in Oregon. As popular educators with experience in both community-based and higher education settings, we viewed the class as an opportunity to explore the potential of PE as a tool to help our students develop a systemic analysis of power and privilege and the concrete skills they would need to address health and social inequities. Given the dearth of empirical studies of liberatory pedagogy in a university setting, we felt that an empirical study of our experience and the experience of our students could fill a significant gap in the literature. Thus, we identified research questions, developed a research design and received permission from the Institutional Review Board at PSU to collect data from students in the class.

This article reports on the findings of our study. First, we provide a brief background on the history and current conceptualization of PE, including an analysis of similarities and differences between PE and other liberatory pedagogies. We then focus more directly on the relatively scant empirical literature about applications of liberatory pedagogy in a higher education context and briefly analyze the problems and possibilities of the university sector as a site for practicing PE. Next, we describe the methods we employed to explore our use of PE in PHE 517 and share our findings. We conclude with a reflection on our findings and their limitations and share suggestions for future research.

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Popular education: history and conceptualization

The word ‘popular’ in ‘popular education’ is derived from the Romance languages where it refers to something belonging to or arising from the vast majority of common people who lack political and economic power (Wiggins *et al.*, 2014). A viable English translation is ‘people’s education.’

Indigenous communities around the world identify similarities between PE and indigenous ways of knowing and being (P. Sosa, personal communication, 1999; Cochran *et al.*, 2008). Latin Americans trace PE’s formal roots to nineteenth century efforts to extend primary education to all, to workers’ universities organized by students influenced by socialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and to adult education efforts that accompanied revolutionary movements throughout the twentieth century (Gómez and Puiggrós, 1986). Workers’ universities are also a feature of PE history through a European lens, as are Correspondence Societies in eighteenth century France, the nineteenth century Chartist movement and Scandinavian folk schools (Crowther, 1999; Chatterton, 2008).

Examples of attempts to make education at all levels ‘popular’ (i.e. accessible to those to whom it had been denied) in the African American community in the USA include clandestine schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Freedom Schools in the 1960s, the convention movement and Black newspapers from the seventeenth century to the present (Chilcoat and Ligon, 1994). Other traditions of PE indigenous to the USA include the practice developed by Myles Horton (Horton, 2003) at the Highlander School in Tennessee and applications and extensions of that practice by leaders of the Civil Rights Movement (Tippett, 2013) and the Labor Movement (Delp *et al.*, 2002). hooks has been an especially influential proponent of PE in the USA and a link between PE and feminist post-structural pedagogy (hooks, 2003). South Africa, the Philippines and many other places around the world have their own histories of PE (Walters and Manicom, 1996).

Taking these influences together, PE can be described as a philosophy and methodology that arises in response to conditions of systematic oppression and attempts to change those conditions by creating situations in which people most affected by inequity can (re)discover their individual and collective capacity and use it to solve problems, shift power and create more equitable communities. It is based on an epistemology that holds that experiential knowledge is at least as valuable as academic

knowledge and that people who have experienced oppression are the experts about their own experience (Wiggins *et al.*, 2014).

Whether or not education is truly ‘popular’ depends on adherence to a set of core principles (Wiggins *et al.*, 2014). As Kane explains, ideology—defined as a set of ideas and beliefs that are used to interpret the world—matters in PE, since it differentiates education that is simply participatory from education that is truly liberating (Kane, 2005).

Methodology in PE is crucial because it supports and embodies the core principles of the pedagogy. Common methods in PE include *dinámicas* that are used to build trust and create community; a variety of brainstorming techniques used to draw out what participants already know; a range of drama-based techniques (radio plays, sociodramas and role plays, among others) used to share new information, spark discussion about controversial topics and provide practice in using new skills; problem posing, a classic Freirian technique used to identify and analyze problems and develop solutions; and cooperative learning methods that help participants develop the skills they need to work collectively (Wiggins *et al.*, 2014). Similarities in methodology across diverse PE settings suggest that educators seeking to undo social inequity and build critical thinking skills come organically to similar strategies.

Popular education and other liberatory pedagogies

Popular education has both similarities to and differences from other liberatory pedagogies more familiar to university educators. Adherents to both PE and critical pedagogy cite Freire as a major influence and sometimes a progenitor. Both traditions are strongly inflected by Marxism (Darder *et al.*, 2003; Wiggins, 2011). An important difference is that PE arises primarily from practice in marginalized communities around the world, whereas critical pedagogy arose primarily out of a desire to bring coherence to theory (Darder *et al.*, 2003). This difference can play out in practice; a principal critique of Ellsworth (Ellsworth, 1989) and many who followed her is that critical pedagogues espouse liberation without changing classroom practice or power relations (Wiggins, 2011). For a fuller discussion of how PE can resolve some of the enduring dilemmas of critical pedagogy, see Wiggins (2011).

Feminist post-structural pedagogy arose primarily from the context of consciousness-raising groups which developed organically in the 1970s out of women’s desire to understand and change their own oppressed conditions under patriarchy (Tisdell, 1998). Similar origins in practice probably account for a shared emphasis with PE on methodology. Popular education’s influence by liberation

theology has resulted in a suspicion of grand narratives that is shared by feminist post-structuralists (Wiggins, 2011). A shortcoming of feminist pedagogy has been its limited use outside the disciplines that produced it (Falk-Rafael *et al.*, 2004).

Liberatory pedagogy in the university classroom

As we have discussed elsewhere (Wiggins, 2011), conflicting epistemologies make practicing PE in the academy an inherently subversive act. With its claim that ‘knowledge gained through life experience is in no way inferior (and in some cases is superior) to the knowledge gained through formal study’ (pp. 45–46), PE directly challenges the attempt by the powerful—including the powerful in the academy—to ‘define knowledge and ignorance to their own benefit’ (p. 46).

This fundamental contrast of epistemology and worldview may account for the fact that we were able to locate only two studies that empirically tested the effectiveness of liberatory pedagogy in a university setting (Falk-Rafael *et al.*, 2004; Wang *et al.*, 2011). Five other articles, while not based on empirical data, did report on higher education applications of liberatory pedagogy (Ellsworth, 1989; Kane, 2001; Fisher, 2005; Chavez *et al.*, 2006; Chatterton, 2008). In addition, we reviewed recent publications that position PE as a ‘distinctive kind of political commitment and the attitude of mind that accompanies it’ [(Crowther *et al.*, 2005), p. 6] and reflect on the place of PE in the academy in a more theoretical and speculative vein (Kane, 2005; Steele, 2010).

A significant theme emerging from these studies is resistance. Resistance from students is based largely on their previous socialization, which has taught them to be uncomfortable with ambiguity and obsessed with knowing the material that will be on the test (Falk-Rafael *et al.*, 2004; Chavez *et al.*, 2006; Chatterton, 2008). Students in a class on autonomous geographies taught by Chatterton in the UK resisted what they perceived as indoctrination and some resisted the idea that change is possible. Falk-Rafael and colleagues theorize that resistance to feminist pedagogy among their US nursing students may have accounted for a high loss to follow-up among one of their experimental groups.

Resistance may also come from the university. Chatterton cites ‘growing institutional pressures’ that discourage the use of liberatory pedagogy (p. 436). Other authors identify broader trends within ‘intellectual and institutional life’ that discourage or preclude the use of PE; these include ‘the hegemony of technical rationality and the new managerialism, the construction of higher education as a competitive marketplace, [and] the commodification of knowledge and research’ [(Crowther *et al.*, 2005), p. 1].

Facilitating factors for liberatory pedagogy include the creation of a safe space through social events, joint participation in progressive political events and opportunities for students to get to know one another's histories and motivations early in the academic term (Ellsworth, 1989; Chavez *et al.*, 2006; Chatterton, 2008). The authors also highlight the importance of classroom organization, decoration and use of space (Falk-Rafael *et al.*, 2004; Chavez *et al.*, 2006). While identifying trends that militate against the use of PE in the academy, some authors also point out that the tradition of academic freedom and faculty members' relative autonomy provide space for resisting ideological and methodological hegemony (Crowther *et al.*, 2005; Kane, 2005; St. Clair, 2005).

METHODS

Background on the class

Increasingly, Health Promotion tracks within graduate programs in Public Health in the USA subscribe to the progressive framework espoused by the World Health Organization's Ottawa Charter (World Health Organization, 1986), which defines health promotion as 'the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health.' This is true of the Health Promotion track of the MPH Program at PSU. Having no major disagreements with established course objectives and knowing that students would be tested on them in their comprehensive exams, we sought to achieve them; however, we reframed them in light of PE and included both the original and our reframed version in the syllabus. As one example, we reframed the original objective 'Explain the relationship between social change and health status' as 'Apply a systemic analysis and understanding of power and privilege to examine health status and identify strategies and solutions for change.' In addition, we shared with our students a working definition of organizing that was consistent with PE's emphasis on naming and deconstructing unearned power and privilege

Bringing together people who have a shared identity to identify issues that affect them, examine and understand the issues, and address the issues by influencing institutions and reshaping dominant culture. Organizing requires a shared political analysis of power and domination that is cultivated by formal, intentional, on-going leadership development and skill building activities.

The text used for PHE 517 (Minkler, 2005) was largely in line with our ideological commitments as popular educators and community organizers. However, in choosing additional readings, we made a number of choices to expose our students 'to a range of ideas and literature

which is often ignored or not seen as relevant to the dominant instrumentalism' in higher education [(Kane, 2005), p. 40]. For example, in the class on the role of research in organizing, we included readings on decolonizing research and research justice. We assigned a number of very practical (non-academic) sources that are used by organizers in the field. We assigned several chapters from a book about the non-profit industrial complex, one of which was written by the second author of this article. Finally, we dedicated an entire class to PE and empowerment theory.

Popular education also influenced our methodology, beginning with actively co-teaching every class, rather than dividing the classes between us as is more common with 'co-taught' classes. 'Community Organizing for Health' met on 11 consecutive Thursdays nights for 2 h and 40 min. Before each class, we rearranged desks into a large horseshoe shape. Class sessions usually began with a welcome, a review of group agreements and a space for students to share burning questions, concerns or insights that had arisen since the previous class. This was followed by a *dinámica* to build trust and community and a cooperative learning activity in which assigned readings were discussed. After a break, students engaged in another group activity—such as a radio play, fishbowl, sociodrama or talk show—to achieve class objectives. Classes ended with a large-group summing up and a group evaluation. In line with the assertion by Chavez *et al.* that 'being nourished and feeding others is a form of cross-cultural learning that increases opportunities for community building' (p. 1178), we provided food for the first class and organized students to bring food for subsequent class sessions (Chavez *et al.*, 2006).

Assignments included: (i) a one-page written summary about organizers and organizations in history; (ii) a class experience of organizing, in which students divided into interest groups and developed an organizing plan to address a chosen issue; (iii) a community experience of organizing, in which students were asked to observe or participate in two events at a community organization and then write a two-page paper about their experience and (iv) a final paper, where students were asked to synthesize class readings and in-class learnings and create a plan for a community organizing project to improve health.

Participants

A total of 28 students participated in the class. Two students flagged their demographic information for confidentiality and two others were students at other universities. The remaining 24 students ranged in age from 24 to 45 with the average age being 29. Only three students identified as male. Seven students (of the total 28) self-identified as people of color and/or international students. With the

exception of two students whose concentration was Health Management and Policy, all students were members of the Health Promotion track. With respect to instructors' positionality, the second author identifies as a woman of color while the first author identifies as white. Our very presence within the academy was, to some degree, an act of PE, since both of us were adjunct instructors and fall somewhere along the spectrum of 'non-traditional' faculty.

Data collection methods and tools

We employed a case study design and mixed methods. An awareness that students might feel compelled to participate in any or all aspects of our study shaped the data collection methods we used, which included a journaling component, a focus group and an anonymous questionnaire. Participants in all data collection methods signed standard informed consent protocols stating that their participation was completely voluntary and would not affect their relationship with PSU or the evaluation of their course work. Participants in the journaling and focus group components were informed that all information linked to their identity would be kept confidential through use of pseudonyms, which are used in reporting results.

For the journaling component, students were asked to write at least four one-page reflections about their experience in PHE 517. They were given the option of keeping the reflections and submitting them at the end of the course, or responding to e-mail prompts sent during the term. Four female students chose to participate, one of whom was of color.

Nine students, including all three men and one student of color, participated in a focus group held after the final class. We submitted final grades before this last class as an additional safeguard for students. We audio recorded the focus group, and the tape was transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Selection bias was a clear limitation of the focus group, which tended to draw our 'fans.'

The anonymous written questionnaire, which was administered during the last class of the term, used a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) to gauge students' level of agreement with 14 statements, seven about the use of PE and seven about the co-teaching aspect of the course. (Information about the co-teaching element will be shared in a subsequent article.) Many students used a space provided under each question to expand on their answers. All students in the class participated. The data collected in the written questionnaire were likely the most balanced feedback we received, because it was anonymous and was gathered after all grades had been submitted.

Data analysis

Quantitative data from the anonymous questionnaire was entered into an Excel spreadsheet and transferred into SPSS for analysis. Qualitative data (journal entries and focus group data) were entered into Atlas.ti. We used a grid to explore relationships between the qualitative and quantitative data from the anonymous questionnaire. Because themes cut across questions and students raised many issues we had not anticipated, we conducted an emic analysis fully grounded in the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In many cases, it was possible to identify respondents to the anonymous questionnaire. We made every effort to identify students across data sources so that we did not double-count their responses.

RESULTS

Quantitative data

Because the quantitative data are cross-sectional and because we did not ask for demographic information on the anonymous questionnaire, we restricted our analysis to descriptive statistics, correlations and reliability estimations (Table 1). Generally, students expressed appreciation for the use of PE in the course. The mean scores for the positively scored items were all 3.5 or above, indicating above average ratings for these items. Students generally appreciated the use of PE in the course ($M = 4.14$), wished PE were used in more courses at PSU ($M = 4.00$) and felt they had a good grasp of PE ($M = 4.25$). Students felt somewhat less strongly, though still generally positively,

Table 1: Means and standard deviations for anonymous questionnaire items

Item	N	M	SD
I appreciated the use of popular education in this course	28	4.14	0.97
I wish popular education were used in more courses at this university	28	4.00	1.089
I feel I now have a good grasp of what popular education is	28	4.25	0.887
I do not plan to use popular education in my future work	28	2.25	1.266
I really wish the instructors had used a more traditional style of teaching in this course	28	2.50	1.106
As a result of the use of popular education, I will be more able to apply what I have learned in this course	28	3.79	0.833
If a more traditional style of teaching has been used in this course, I would have learned more	28	2.68	0.983

that they would be better able to apply what they had learned because of the use of PE ($M = 3.79$) in the course. Negatively scored items all polled lower than the median score of 3. The greatest variability in responses was on the items regarding students' intention to use PE in their future work ($SD = 1.266$), their wish that a more traditional style of teaching had been used ($SD = 1.106$) and their wish that PE were used more widely at PSU ($SD = 1.089$).

Qualitative data

There was good consistency between the quantitative and the qualitative data. Themes that arose from the qualitative data included clear and consistent definitions of PE; positive results of using PE; the role of particular techniques, attitudes and practices in achieving those results; consistency between the methodology and the course topic; desires for more traditional pedagogy; contrasts between the methodology and the setting and an overall sense of empowerment resulting from students' experience.

Conception of PE

Students' responses in the focus group suggested that students left PHE 517 with a good grasp of PE. Focus group participants identified PE as a 'co-learning environment where everyone is a teacher and everyone is a student' and as a non-hierarchical, empowering, applied, collaborative form of education. Andrew described the PE process this way:

I think it comes down to first learning what those participating know about the topic and then trying to develop what they know into a broader kind of an idea by gathering everybody else's input and then being able to . . . project that into society.

In her definition, Louisa explained how, by valuing input and experience, PE increases participation:

Popular education . . . ascribes a value to what people are already coming in with. And so there isn't this mentality of coming in and starting from zero and sort of placing yourself in a position where you feel like you maybe have less knowledge. So, I think that is definitely more encouraging of people to participate and be active, because they feel that they have something to offer and contribute.

Focus group participants were able to clearly define PE and linked its use to increased participation.

Results of using PE

Students identified a variety of other results of using PE. They expressed that PE *increased energy* and made the class go by quickly. 'The varied methodology really kept my energy up, unlike lots of other classes' stated Angela,

in the focus group. Summing up comments made by multiple students, a respondent to the anonymous questionnaire concluded: 'This is the only 2.5 h class I've taken where I wasn't constantly checking the clock and I never dreaded to come to class.'

Another result identified by students across all data sources was *increased commitment*. A number of students commented that they felt compelled to do all the reading because they were involved in class and their opinion mattered. As Angela stated during the focus group:

I did all the readings, and this is the only class where I didn't actually miss one class the entire term. I felt kind of an obligation to come and be part of that community, and invest in the course, more so than with the others.

In a journal entry, Alison reflected that the commitment engendered by PE extended to engaging more deeply with the material:

Overall, the use of popular education appears to infuse the class with energy, dedication to do all of the readings and engage in discussions that go beyond the text and into the deeper rooted issues that we struggle with.

Popular education appeared to increase commitment in ways both small and large.

Along with increased commitment came *increased retention and applicability of the class material*. 'I had to work things out on my own and with my fellow classmates more, which I think will make the information "stick" longer,' commented a participant on the anonymous questionnaire. Respondents to the questionnaire observed that while it might have been possible to cover more material with conventional methods, they would have been less able to retain and apply the material. Alison, in her journal entry, concurred, saying, 'the critical part of this class has been the clear applicability of course concepts to real-life community struggles and action campaigns.'

Students were divided about whether they actually *learned more* as a result of PE. Participants in the journaling component were fairly unanimous that they did not. 'While the popular education and co-teaching aspects of the course had some positive contributions, overall I struggled to feel that they added anything substantive to my understanding of the material,' Jennifer stated. Natalie felt she learned skills but lacked concepts. One journal respondent felt that PE may have interfered with the academic goals of the course, and two others felt that the use of PE was related to a lack of coherence in the course. Other students disagreed, relating increased learning to the increased commitment described above. 'I do feel like I have learned more and knowing that I am more involved in class made me more willing to do

all of the readings,' stated an anonymous questionnaire respondent.

Role of particular PE techniques, attitudes and practices

As to how PE might be related to increased learning, commitment, and/or retention, students across all data sources found *particular PE techniques* to be especially helpful. This theme was particularly notable in the journal responses. Generally, journal writers commented positively on the *dinámicas*, social learning games used to increase energy and build trust. Alison emphasized how the *dinámicas* helped students put away other concerns and focus on the class:

The *dinámicas* at the beginning of class make the entire class more engaged, less distracted by the events of the day and more focused on the material and the course. It creates a sense of community, taking away all focus on outside activities, obligations, and pressures that take away concentration.

Natalie also felt *dinámicas* helped to build community. 'I think the *dinámicas* are a good reminder that class can be fun and active and a great way to further develop the sense of community among our classmates.'

Across all data sources, students expressed appreciation for *cooperative learning methodology*. According to Natalie, in a journal response, 'this model seems to have worked really well in our small group discussions. Assigning each person a role gives a sense of purpose to each member of the group and ensures that no one feels left out.' Ben related the cooperative learning methodology to his desire to do all the class readings: 'I think that is why I like the small groups so much, because my opinion mattered and I wanted to make sure I was prepared enough to state my opinion.'

In the latter part of the course, we made greater use of didactic PE techniques like *sociodramas*, *radio plays* and *talk shows*. These were very popular with students. In a journal response, Natalie reflected on how learning material in a creative way led to non-convention understanding of the material:

Most recently our instructors have introduced different topics through talk shows, radio shows, and sociodramas. These are definitely my favorite popular education activities yet! Because the information is presented in such engaging and entertaining ways, I feel like my understanding and learning of the material tends to be more creative and unconventional as well.

Dramatic techniques helped students understand course concepts in greater depth.

One technique our use of which was almost universally disliked by students was a *fishbowl*. In this technique, two or more speakers have a conversation in the center of the room while other participants observe the interaction. We used this technique to attempt to resolve students' questions about the final assignment. Students felt that the fishbowl took too much class time and revealed inconsistent expectations on our part. Alison spoke for other classmates in the following journal entry:

While I think this exercise was to demonstrate how popular education encourages finding answers from the existing knowledge of group/community members, it was a bit confusing in this context. Ultimately, I think we (as a class) got the answers to most of our questions, but in the process it seemed that there was a lack of consensus among the instructors about the actual format and requirements for the assignment.

Upon further reflection, we agreed with students that this technique was not well suited to providing answers in a high stakes environment. However, we did not agree that it revealed problematic inconsistencies in our perspective; rather, we felt it demonstrated that divergent opinions are the natural result of divergent positionality. At least one student agreed. Acknowledging that she was expressing an opinion that differed from opinions of her classmates, a student of color commented:

Something that I took away from [the fishbowl] was . . . having both of you there and both of you discussing how you interpreted that question or the written words. I think that was also an example of what you may encounter out in the real world depending on the backgrounds you come from. So, sort of being able to open your brains to those perspectives or how people might interpret or answer a question. I thought it was helpful to see.

Some students found the fishbowl helpful while others found it confusing.

Students also appreciated *particular attitudes and practices* on the part of the instructors. Andrew, a focus group participant, appreciated our accessibility and felt it contributed to a sense of collegiality:

One thing I loved about the class was the personal touch that you guys added . . . I think the biggest thing was the accessibility, to having your opinion on things. It created this atmosphere of us being colleagues and friends in a sense, whereas, a lot of classes here I have taken . . . you feel more like you are a cog in the wheel. You are not really on the same level as the professor.

Students appreciated a variety of PE techniques and the sense of equality between teacher and student that is an essential element of PE.

Some traditional pedagogy would have been helpful

Across the anonymous questionnaire and the journal entries, students expressed that some traditional pedagogy would have enhanced their learning. Respondents to the anonymous questionnaire felt that more traditional pedagogy would have been helpful for ‘topics that demand greater detail of instruction’ and for explaining ‘big concepts and theories.’ A consistent theme in the anonymous questionnaire was students’ desire for more slides and notes. Alison echoed this desire in a journal entry: ‘The only concern that I have is whether the concepts are being covered as coherently, and would prefer to have more review sheets to reinforce the core concepts.’ Jennifer expressed that while she had taken away from the course ‘valuable tidbits’ and strategies for organizing, she was still struggling to organize the material into a larger conceptual framework.

Contrasts between the methodology and the setting

Our students problematized the use of PE in a university classroom. According to Andrew, in the focus group: ‘You have this really independent kind of free-flowing, coming from the student participation, a type of popular education, in a system, in a structure of education that is really hierarchical.’ In a journal entry, Jennifer reflected on how the nature of PE might work against clarity of expectations for graded assignments:

One thing that I’ve come to understand about popular education is that it aims to dismantle power structures that are traditionally prohibitive of community participation and/or co-learning. In the setting of a graduate level course that has graded assignments however, that aspect of popular education seemed to create a bit of a blur for what was expected in our course work.

Margaret, a participant who had previous experience with PE, expressed that she had struggled with our application of PE in the university environment:

I have had a good amount of experience with popular education, so bringing it into this academic environment, was just very, I don’t want to say jarring, but I’ve had some conflict with it, because I think fundamentally, it’s based on a different set of values.

Margaret particularly struggled with the time required to practice PE, feeling that perhaps that time could have been better spent covering course concepts.

Some students who were new to PE acknowledged the contrast between the methodology and the environment, but felt that, if this were the only way students would be

exposed to PE, the dissonance was manageable. According to Angela, in the focus group:

[This] is the first class that I have taken in which there was popular education and I found it kind of unsettling and confusing . . . but at the same time I found it incredibly refreshing, and as a really nice glimpse into a field, of an alternative as opposed to my other classes in which I have to sit for almost four hours and be sort of dictated to and . . . so I felt like if this is the only way that PSU students are going to be exposed to it, it is workable.

Louisa, another focus group participant, concurred, saying while she could understand why others might feel frustrated, she accepted the class as a hybrid ‘because I understood the limitations of working within this setting.’

In a journal entry, Margaret suggested that perhaps the dissonance between the methodology and the environment could be reduced if the instructors took time early in the term to acknowledge the ‘fundamental difference in values’:

Traditional western education values information and knowledge, whereas popular education values relationships and people. Calling out this paradigm shift can help participants recalibrate their expectations which will change the way they evaluate their experience as successful or positive.

Responding to comments such as these, in subsequent years I (Wiggins) have dedicated the second or third class of the term to an introduction to PE. This change has appeared to relieve to some degree the dissonance students experience.

Shifting and balancing power

Respondents across all data sources expressed that our approach to teaching PHE 517 had successfully shifted power dynamics. Many identified an interaction between *power, participation and sense of community*.

Alison commented that, over the course of the term, she had seen a change in the interactions between instructors and students. She was struck by the willingness of students to engage in discussion with the instructors and with one another, and the impact of that sharing on power dynamics:

Compared to most courses in the program, participants are more willing to engage in conversation with instructors, making it a more horizontal approach to teaching and learning. Participants are more likely to offer their opinions, engage in conversations before class, during break and after class regarding the material; there is an investment in the material and in the application of the principles outside of the classroom.

Alison concluded that in a course focused on developing analytical skills, this deep investment in the material was 'a sign of success.'

Jennifer agreed that there had been an increase in participation over the course of the term and a shift in power. She commented on the involvement of students in class discussions and expressed that, while the instructors still retained more power than students, the power differential was much smaller than in other graduate classes she had taken. She located the source of the difference in the classroom environment and the use of particular PE techniques.

Relative to other courses in the program, the class size is pretty large and there is a mix of students from different tracks within the program. At first there was almost a palpable sense of 'newness' . . . but now there seems to be a greater sense of comfort and ease in the dynamics between students especially during the course activities and discussions. Reflecting on why this might be different from other courses, I think it is associated with the classroom environment that fosters engagement in a variety of ways, such as: allowing food for sharing with the class, an open circle arrangement of desks, the use of *dinamicas* (sic) each class (particularly ones that invite sharing something about ourselves so that we get to know each other a little better and find commonalities within the group), and small group activities.

Both Natalie (in the journaling component) and Louisa (in the focus group) also pointed to the importance of certain PE practices for increasing participation, building community and balancing power. Natalie stated that 'personally, I am usually quieter during class but the different activities have encouraged me to participate more.' Louisa emphasized the role of PE practices in building community, comparing PHE 517 to another class she had had that also focused on class discussion

I did have another course which was about the same size, also focused on discussion. But there wasn't the same type of emphasis on say, getting to know everybody's name, or sitting in a circle every day, or establishing ground rules, as far as protocol, because even though we're at this age, where it's sort of assumed that we know how to behave in this sort of atmosphere, establishing those rules at the beginning I really did think, made a difference. So I think I felt [a] much friendlier, more communal environment.

Overall, Natalie credited PE for setting a standard 'that "power" should not be only . . . in the hands of the instructors but should be shared amongst all participants of the course.' Students in PHE 517, particularly those in the journaling component, expressed that PE helped to increase participation, build community and balance power.

DISCUSSION

The results of our study reinforce themes identified by the relatively few authors who have explored their use of liberatory pedagogy in university classrooms. Like Falk-Rafael *et al.* (Falk-Rafael *et al.*, 2004), Chatterton (Chatterton, 2008), and Kane (Kane, 2001), we experienced resistance to our approach from students who had been conditioned to expect unequivocal answers and teacher-directed solutions. Like Chatterton, our students identified a contrast between our 'free-flowing' approach and the hierarchical university environment. Based on our experience of the time and effort required to teach the course, we came to agree with Chatterton that use of liberatory pedagogy depends on the personal passion and commitment of the instructor. Our students also concurred with Ellsworth (Ellsworth, 1989), Chatterton and Chavez *et al.* (Chavez *et al.*, 2006) about the importance of creating an atmosphere of trust and community by arranging chairs in a circle, providing food and creating social events outside of class.

Our students highlighted the importance of techniques, practices and attitudes specific to PE that were largely missing from previous efforts. Techniques included the *dinamicas* that were used to focus attention and create community; cooperative learning, which made students accountable to one another; and dramatic techniques, which reinforced concepts and contributed to a more expansive understanding. Practices included always starting with what students already know and establishing group agreements, such as the agreement to balance participation around the room. These practices embody the attitudes required of popular educators and their students, such as genuinely valuing the knowledge and capacity *all* students bring and sharing power with and among them. According to our students, intentional use of these techniques, practices and attitudes can lead to increased participation and actual shifts in power.

Limitations of the research

Some of the limitations of our study were related to our determination to avoid any appearance of coercion of students to whom we were assigning grades. For this reason, we did not collect baseline data and we used an anonymous post-questionnaire. We utilized convenience sampling for both the journaling component and the focus group, which virtually ensured selection bias. Even though we stressed that the opinions students expressed would not affect their grades and timed data collection to give students optimal control, we cannot be sure students did not tell us what they perceived we wanted to hear.

Other limitations were due to the fact that our study included students in only one graduate class at one

university. For this reason, we were unable to compare graduate and undergraduate students. Additionally, the small sample meant we could not stratify by demographic factors like race/ethnicity, parents' income or social class, to explore whether social status affects receptivity to PE (as our experience suggests that it does).

Like the authors whose studies we reviewed, we were not able to follow students once they left our class to determine whether and how the experience of the class affected their lives and their work. The explicit aim of PE is to enable participants to use their knowledge to create a more just and equitable society. Because we could not follow students over time, we have no way of assessing the success of our experiment in achieving this ultimate goal.

Suggestions for further research

Our study underlines the need for longitudinal, multi-site studies of the use of PE in university environments, to assess whether and how PE may be able to balance power in the classroom and prepare students to address inequities in the larger world. Such studies could also explore how different instructor characteristics may influence use of PE and investigate whether different groups of students react differently to PE. Do students from communities that are historically underrepresented in university classrooms benefit more, or do all students benefit equally? What types of benefits, if any, accrue? Future studies could also explore concrete disincentives to practicing liberatory pedagogy, such as competing time demands, lack of recognition in the promotion and tenure process, and low compensation rates and low status for adjunct and non-traditional faculty, as well as emotional and affective barriers, such as fears of giving up power.

CONCLUSION

In a time of high-stakes testing and increasing inequality, liberatory pedagogies are more important now than ever, especially in disciplines such as health promotion, where effective practice depends on the ability to understand and eliminate inequities. According to St. Clair, academics have a particular responsibility to use their intellectual capital and 'their training in the organization and dissemination of knowledge' to work for a more just and equitable society [(St. Clair, 2005), p. 44]. Critical and feminist theories serve as frameworks for deconstructing teaching and learning in the context of larger social forces of domination. But putting the theories into practice can be challenging, even for teachers who come to education as a means of making the world a more just and equitable place. Popular education has a long history of explicitly

using particular methods and commitments on the part of the teacher to upend unequal power relationships, both in society and in the classroom. The practice of PE offers a concrete alternative to the conventional pedagogy of higher education and a useful compliment to liberatory approaches like critical and feminist pedagogy. Finding ways to overcome barriers and support its use is a priority for students and faculty in health promotion and across the curriculum.

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