Teaching together: Reflections on developing a collaborative approach to pedagogy within a tertiary teaching team

HILARY DUTTON
ANNELIES KAMP
CHRISTOPH TESCHERS

University of Canterbury

INTRODUCTION

The Bachelor of Youth and Community Leadership (BYCL) was launched by the University of Canterbury (UC) in 2020. The genesis of this new degree was a Stage One service-learning course that, in turn, arose from the innovative and active response of many of the university's students in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. That innovative action saw the formation of the Student Volunteer Army as well as the adoption of a new set of Graduate Attributes for every undergraduate at the university. The idea of a specialist undergraduate degree that captured this unique chain of events began to take form from 2016. The resulting degree was developed as a flexible, transdisciplinary programme for young (and not so young) leaders wanting an academic grounding for their passions in community leadership and social action. In 2020, the inaugural intake of students commenced their studies. In this reflection, we discuss our experience of teaching within the BYCL for the first time, using a collaborative approach to teaching that we based on what we understand, individually and collectively, to draw on principles of democratic pedagogy.

DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

Our aspiration is for our enrolled students—at whichever Stage—to experience the degree as a collective space. That brought challenges given the BYCL is designed to offer students the opportunity to choose courses from across UC's five Colleges. Students take just four specialist leadership courses taught by the School of Educational Studies and Leadership (EDSL), as well as recommended and elective courses from across the university. Together with the original service-learning course that is the heritage course for the BYCL, these five courses form the backbone of the BYCL degree, generating that collective space. Collectively, these courses are conceptualised as the *pou tokomanawa* of the degree: the first central pole that supports the ridge pole of a *whare* (meeting house). In the context of the BYCL, the pou reinforces the

coherence and core values of the degree as a shared narrative for teachers and students. Across the degree, BYCL students engage with programme content from multiple disciplines, and may be taught using various discipline-specific pedagogies as they follow one of the pathways through the degree (activism, humanitarianism, social entrepreneurship, and youth work and development), or design their own pathway. The pou therefore represents 'home' for the degree—a place where students bring back their learning from across the university. Here, they reunite with BYCL staff and students, year on year, to weave the diverse knowledge they encounter through a lens of community engagement and leadership for social change (Western, 2008).

Prior to programme launch, it was decided that a shared vision and practice of teaching within the pou was needed to deliver coherence to students, and to the course more broadly. The nature of the BYCL, as a degree for young people looking to lead in their communities, informed the adoption of democratic pedagogy as the foundation of teaching in the pou for the inaugural year and beyond. Drawing on Horton and Freire (1990), classes would be co-constructed by teachers and students, providing multiple opportunities for student leadership and participation based on the knowledge and experiences they bring to the teaching space. It was envisioned that by establishing a shared pedagogy, we could communicate to students that while they head to other disciplines to gain knowledge relevant to their specific pathway, they would come back home, to the pou, and here would experience a consistent approach to teaching and learning.

A COLLECTIVE REFLECTION OF OUR EXPERIENCE

As the inaugural year of the BYCL wrapped up, a group of seven staff who taught into the pou came together to reflect on the year. A critical strand of our reflection concerned how we manifested our collaborative teaching framework as practice within the context of the neoliberal university. It seemed important that this reflection, too, be done collectively, in line with our declaration of a democratic approach and because of the shared narrative that was demanded by the pou tokomanawa. In our reflective discussions, it became clear that our shared pedagogical framework presented both opportunities and challenges to teaching.

Collaborative teaching and collegial responsibility

One of the questions that arose from our reflections was: what are our responsibilities to one another under a collaborative approach to teaching? Having a shared commitment to the pou places additional expectations on one another as teachers. As such, staff who were not teaching into a class could reasonably have expectations about how their colleagues taught that class, even though they were not directly involved. To what extent did we have a responsibility to one another to change the way we might otherwise teach our specialist content in order to meet the expectations of our BYCL colleagues? An exemplar of this came from one of our team members who taught the heritage course which had existed for eight years before the launch of the BYCL. He reflected on how our shared commitment to the pou shifted his pedagogy in the course:

> However, the location of this course within a larger programme made my approach to CHCH101 fundamentally different. I was constantly thinking of how this course fits within the degree, particularly with regard to providing scaffolded experiences of project design and implementation, which is what BYCL students will encounter later in the degree in the 300 level courses.

Elsewhere in his reflection, he referred to feeling "more accountability" now that his course is embedded within a degree. Because of this shift, he had to actively examine how to achieve cohesion between his existing course and the pou being developed specifically for the BYCL. Ultimately, this accountability did result in change—he adjusted one of the assessments to better align with and support students in the Stage Three course. We also acknowledge, however, this is not a one-off process, limited to what we learned during our first iteration of the BYCL. It is likely that the pou will expand and flex depending on what we learn about the degree, and its stakeholders, as we teach into it over consecutive years.

Practicing democratic pedagogy

A challenge of our collaborative approach which became clear in our process of reflection is that teachers had different understandings of the finer points of how 'democratic pedagogy' worked in practice, due to their differing philosophical and theoretical backgrounds. Through our preparation for the BYCL and the establishment of our collaborative approach to teaching, we felt we had a shared understanding of democratic pedagogy based on common theoretical principles (Horton & Freire, 1990). By the end of the year, we could see the complexities of grounding our teaching in this shared narrative, as our divergent ways of translating theory to practice became apparent. For instance, one of our core courses included a weekly leadership activity, where a small group of students organised and led discussions on the lecture topic for a given week, drawing on their own experiences and the week's assigned readings. Giving over lecture space to students and encouraging them to link academic work to their own experiences was part of the democratic pedagogy for that course. This generated tensions among the teaching staff, however. For some of us, having a structured part of every lecture for students to shape is democratic—they are co-constructing the lesson. For others, the decision-making about the activity itself needed to be democratic, meaning students can choose whether they want to do it.

Upon our shared reflection, we are left with questions: Are practices such as our leadership activity 'enough' democratic pedagogy? In what ways did our practice uphold democratic pedagogy and in what ways did it limit it? Are there limitations to engaging in democratic pedagogy for first year students who are still learning how to manage the demands of tertiary study? Even if an activity is presented as optional, does the power dynamic allow students to make an authentic choice? Students themselves reported mixed feelings on the value of this activity. As another staff member noted in her reflection:

> I must acknowledge the complexities and the risk of enacting these ideas in the classroom: the problems

> associated with trying to understand each other fully, the potential of critical pedagogy to silence student voices, the power imbalances within any classroom, the "learned and internalised oppressions" (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 99) that we are never truly free of and the ontological violence of attempting to alter students views of themselves and the world.

Reflections on our expectations of, and responsibility to, one another is also informed by our commitment to democratic pedagogy within the pou. Although our collective reflection largely revolved around the way this was actioned in teaching spaces as part of the teacher-learner dynamic, there was a smaller thread present for several of our team. In one of our core courses, we had two staff co-teaching: one, a senior staff member who was deeply involved with the development of the BYCL more generally, and the other an early career academic who joined the EDSL team just prior to the programme start. For various reasons—including the integration of new staff and responding to the flux created by COVID-19—the course that was planned changed during implementation. Our senior staff member reflected:

> The course I teach now does not resemble the course I had envisaged I would be teaching: [new staff member's] arrival changed both content and pedagogy, in positive ways. As such, I had to learn how she was envisaging and connecting to this programme, and then leverage off that, rather than just my own prior experience.

In a context of pressured workloads, this relearning of our own teaching is demanding. The values that underpin democratic pedagogy also informs the co-teaching relationship. The new early career academic brought the experience and knowledge she had to the course, but it was not as aligned with the course design that preceded her arrival. Rather than taking over or encouraging a new staff member to do her teaching differently, both adopted a listening and learning orientation. As Wenger (2000) has elaborated, in the space where existing competence rubs up against new experience, learning of necessity takes place and this is where innovation thrives.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Other questions persist: to what extent, for instance, do we need to be employing the same teaching practices, or are different practices underpinned by a commitment to the shared principles sufficient? Certainly, these questions in themselves demand that teachers involved in this kind of critical pedagogical work have a clear understanding of their individual teaching philosophy, and are able to imagine how that philosophy can connect to that of others (Gravett & Kinchin, 2020). Similarly, while we have made a commitment to a democratic pedagogy, the parameters, limits and possibilities of such a pedagogy in the context of the neoliberal university continue to be refined (Ellsworth, 1989). Our shared reflection has not provided us with all the answers. Indeed, our struggle with these questions will need more time, but next year we will—following

Horton and Friere (1980)—make more of the road by walking. These questions, and others that have arisen from our reflections, will inform our research agenda going forward.

Devising and implementing such a framework for use across multiple courses has had its complications. There were teething problems, as expected in any course being run for the first time. Furthermore, the significant impact of COVID-19 exacerbated some anticipated complications and introduced new ones. Yet, during our reflection it was clear that the commitment to the framework had remained strong and anchored us, as well as our students. There is a sense that having a shared pedagogy within the pou does what we hoped it would by providing coherence and foundational values within the BYCL. The pou is, in one sense, structural—these core courses hold together the rest of the degree and are the space for students to bring their learning from across the university 'home'—but without due care, the pou could break. Without diligence born of our responsibility to one another, established through a shared narrative and pedagogy, they could revert to the norm: courses as silos that exist relatively independent from others in a given degree. In these early days of the BYCL, it seems that the teaching within the pou will play an integral role in keeping the whare strong through having a common purpose and tending to it regularly through our continual reflexivity.

Acknowledgements

REFERENCES

Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review, 59*(3), 297-325. https://doi:10.17763/haer.59.3.058342114k266250

Gravett, K., & Kinchin, I. (2020). Revisiting 'A "teaching excellence" for the times we live in': posthuman possibilities. *Teaching in Higher Education, 25*(8), 1028-1034. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1807497

Horton, M., & Freire, P. (1990). *We make the road by walking. Conversations on education and social change.* Temple University Press.

Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organizational Articles. 7*(2), pp.225-46

Western, S. (2008). *Leadership: A critical text.* SAGE