Learning Activities that Cultivate Community and Critical Thinking in the Child Life Classroom

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Child life students are entering a profession that is known to be competitive, homogenous, and poorly compensated. To sit for certification, many students have to put off work to apply multiple rounds to acquire training placements (Boles et al., 2024; Wittenberg Camp et al., 2023), with some even needing to relocate. With these strains on the profession, I see it essential to approach child life education from a social justice stance. A social justice classroom creates a space where students are truly known, where students can be critical of the world, and where justice and activism are as valued as academic rigor. Paulo Freire (1970) argued that people need to develop critical conscientization and engage in praxis that incorporate theory, action, and reflection as a means to work toward social change and justice. *Critical conscientization*, or critical consciousness, involves recognizing and challenging oppressive systems. Similarly, *praxis* involves the work of a student or group of students acting on their environment in order to critically reflect on their reality and transform it through further action. By gaining these skills, students will have the tools needed for advocating for the profession.

Within this umbrella, I focus the most on cultivating a classroom that promotes two pieces of social justice education: community and critical thinking. Community for the peer support and networking required to pursue a competitive profession with high incidence of burnout and critical thinking for the profession's challenges related to diversity, internship access, and compensation. Freire (1970) promoted critical thinking in his classroom through dialogue and collaboration rather than traditional teacher-centered instruction. He promoted community in his teaching by seeing students as active participants in the learning process who develop knowledge and skills through relationship. In this way, he focused on cultivating dialogue between teacher and student as well as among students themselves. Similarly, bell hooks (1994) emphasized the importance of creating a nurturing and inclusive learning environment, where students feel safe to engage in dialogue and express their thoughts and experiences. Too, she believed in the integration of personal experience into the learning process, encouraging students to connect academic content with their lived realities.

As a child life academic, I am lucky to teach for a graduate child life program that is relatively affordable, flexible to students' work and caregiving schedules, and racially and ethnically diverse. Because the program is fully online, I am often wondering how to ensure my courses can promote critical thinking and community without the benefits of a shared, in-person space. In this paper, I provide examples of learning activities and approaches that have helped me stay focused on fostering critical thinking and community. Each section also considers additions for future semesters. The intent of this article is not to make suggestions; instead, it is my hope to create a dialogue with academics and students to hear what is working and what is safe to leave behind.

Mirroring Community

A benefit of teaching in an online space is that I have the flexibility to lecture, grade, and meet with students on my own schedule, between school pick-ups. But this benefit is what also makes me miss the in-person interaction that sparked my interest in teaching. Students say the same thing: they would not have the capacity to get their masters without the flexibility of the online program and they feel they are missing out on the energy of a shared, in-person community. To help students feel more connected to one another, our program contains opportunities for cultivating community including opportunities to meet socially online, to provide peer review in small groups, to attend virtual presentations from practicing child life specialists, to interview one another for course assignments, and to provide peer support for practicum and internship applications. We encourage students to move beyond platitudes and truly connect with one another.

One of the most meaningful assignments in our program occurs during the grief course. Students meet synchronously in small groups throughout the semester to complete a collection of activities related to loss. Many of our students mention this assignment in the final portfolio defense, sharing that it helped them not only identify biases and beliefs regarding death that might impact their work, but it also gave them an opportunity to develop deep friendships with their peers, based on vulnerable reflection. Students take turns leading the activities to practice facilitating praxis, emotional safety, and trust in the group.

In our child life course, students develop a peer-review community. In lab assignments asking students to apply the knowledge gained from the course, students create meaningful family resources, intervention plans, and research proposals. Each student submits their own product and also provides detailed peer reviews on classmates' work. Students receive the most points on the assignment if they integrate the feedback given to them into an edited product. Throughout the semester, the groups become more trusting of one another and their feedback becomes more authentic and specific. Students often mention how the assignment helps them develop confidence in sharing their work with their community, a necessary skill when engaging in advocacy.

These assignments ask students to take risks with their peers by vulnerably sharing online. Modeling this work is a key component to social justice pedagogy. Recently, when considering my curriculum, I questioned whether I was also taking risks with my peers and being vulnerable. The answer is rarely and certainly not as often as an educator who embodies the social justice approach to teaching. In the future, while asking students to cultivate community, I would also like to be doing the same thing. I plan to do this by seeking out online communities to discuss pedagogy, sharing my work with peers who can provide feedback (like now!), and ensuring that the feedback I provide students strengthens our

relationship. As a member of the Child Life Academic Society, I am hoping that this emerging community for academics will provide more opportunities for modeling the connections I require of my students.

Experimenting with Format

In an online masters program, students write. Papers and assessments and discussion posts and observations and literature reviews and on and on, they are asked to hone their writing during the program. Our students graduate as skilled communicators and while this is helpful for their clinical work, both community and critical thinking can be cultivated by stepping outside the traditional paper format. We focus on reflexive practice when helping our students strengthen their critical thinking. Each course in the program offers opportunities for students to reflect deeply on their identities, their biases, and their past health experiences and what all of it means for their future work. In multiple courses, students are given freedom to use whatever format they would like to reflect on the course content. Some students submit audio files or videos or slide shows or paintings or poetry, whatever helps them communicate their ideas. While many still submit in the traditional paper-format, it is exciting to see a reflection that breaks this mold. When students experiment and get creative, I feel as though I know them more and can authentically see their growth.

In my developmental theories course, with each new theory students are asked to submit a reflection on how the theory aligns with (or contradicts) their own development. To ensure the reflections are not burdensome, I ask that students give themselves only 15 minutes to create their reflection. As a result, the discussion thread is alive with childhood photos, handwritten notes, short stories, collages, and comic strips. Students teach back their connection to theory in these short, creative formats and it helps me see their ability to teach outside of a traditional model. Students have shared that the flexibility helps them demonstrate their knowledge in a way that aligns with their strengths and values. I see the benefit of these creative reflection assignments when asking students to demonstrate their critical thinking. When students reflect on oppression and power in a case, students first position themselves within the details of the story to identify biases, beliefs, values, or experiences that might impact the way they approach the case. I also see it building community. As Beins (2016) writes, "in order to appreciate one's classmates in all their complexity and to begin forming relationships with them, it helps to view them as real people" and these learning activities help classmates see their classmates as rounded, alive, and complex (p. 158).

In an effort to embody the work I ask of my students, I am hoping to integrate more creative formats into my future teaching. Teaching with internship readiness and the certification exam in mind, I provide countless readings. But by mirroring the act of reflecting on the content in creative formats, I could help students who might not learn best by reading and those who need modeling before they can feel comfortable reflecting in new ways. bell hooks (1994) discussed how learning emphasizes silent, passive obedience, even in postsecondary schools. To support students in their efforts to build skills in activism, it can help to model breaking outside the expected norm. In in-person classrooms, small moments of chit chat can help support a learning community (Beins, 2016) so in future semesters, I am also considering how to infuse more socializing into my courses.

Embracing Technology

Like all technology, teaching online has its advantages and disadvantages. In a similar vein, AI can also introduce positive and negative variables to teaching. When Chat GPT first launched in 2022, there was worry from fellow faculty that students would do less work and we would be grading mostly AI-generated papers in our courses. I learned that students were already using it as a tool, so it was already playing a role in child life education and training. Seeing how students engage with the tool helps me understand it more. In Butulis (2023), advantages of AI technology are discussed including how it can help save time, edit papers, and generate content like case studies. While the impact on student writing and course development is promising, I am most curious about how AI could be used to support critical thinking.

To experiment with the technology, I have replaced a learning activity in my child life course with one centered on critiquing an OpenAI-generated product. Students are asked to use ChatGPT, Google Bard, New Bing or others to design a legacy activity for a specific case. In small groups, they work together to critique the intervention for its ability to support coping and development. The legacy plans are surprisingly detailed and yet, there is much room for improvement; too, students find it easier to critique a robot compared to a peer, making it a helpful activity for scaffolding peer review. In future semesters, I plan on integrating more AI-generated activities. One learning activity could occur during our cultural humility module where students are asked to reflect on how their intersecting identities may lead to implicit bias when working with families from different backgrounds. When experimenting with ChatGPT, I used the prompt, *I am a healthy, able-bodied, middle-class, white, heterosexual, cis-gendered female. I just got a job working at a children's hospital. What implicit biases might come up in my work?*, and the result was a comprehensive list of implicit biases and how they could arise with patients and coworkers. Asking students to do this and then add anything ChatGPT forgot or left out, could be a helpful exercise when discussing bias.