

OOPS! Or, Designing an Intercultural Online Participatory Seminar in the Spirit of Highlander Folk School

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Abstract

Seeking to build a relational, reflexive, dialogical, and praxis-oriented open, online learning space to engage intercultural teaching and learning, an experienced educator of future teachers and a graduate student in youth leadership developed an online seminar that embodied its content (intercultural, inclusive learning and teaching) in praxis. This paper outlines the process of designing the seminar, briefly examines how it functioned, and closes with ideas for exploration with NCL participants.

Keywords

learning spaces, participatory seminar, feminist pedagogies, social justice pedagogies, multicultural learning and teaching, universal design for learning, inclusive learning and teaching, dialogic discussion, Highlander Folk School, learning circles

Overview

A classroom characterized as persons connected in a net of relationships with people who care about each other's learning as well as their own is very different from classroom that is comprised of teacher and students. (Shrewsbury, 1987, p. 6)

Our experiences learning and teaching in higher education lead us to believe that a course exploring multicultural and inclusive learning and teaching is essential to creating better universities. Both of us have recognized the failure of even very well-intentioned teachers to foster classroom communities that enable learning for all students in a deeply inclusive environment. Doing so requires setting aside many common teaching practices and other university pressures, as well as differentiating the space we create in our classroom from a university that often impairs learning for many students. We created this course because we wanted to be part of a conversation that has been much requested by students and faculty. It is an open, online course because we wanted to make it possible for a wide range of people to participate.

As university teachers and activists rooted in pedagogies that emerge from social justice movements, we are committed to discussion practices and learning spaces that embody the citizen leadership practices of the Highlander Folk School: relational, reflexive, and praxis-oriented. We sought to do this in an online space that encouraged these types of connection between learners, teachers, and the materials we brought together. We attempted to address three compelling, emergent questions:

- How do we design a seminar as an open, online learning space where teaching professionals explore richly diverse pedagogical histories, intercultural and inclusive learning theories, and boundary crossing practices through dialogical discussions? (Coffield and Edwards, 2009; Lather, 1991)
- How do we counter repressive tolerance – the practice of allowing all voices to be heard, even if they play on systemically harmful narratives (like racism, sexism, etc.)? (Brookfield, 2007)
- How do we wrestle with the pervasive “problem of time” (Wallace 2000) – practitioners’ on-going hope to infuse multicultural learning and teaching practices that is often side-lined by perceptions of there not being time enough to “deal with” classroom diversity, or support enough to “get to” the work of building more intercultural learning and teaching practices?

We collaborated with students and colleagues, disability resources, and academic teaching and technology staff to design the course in response to these questions.

Designing an Intercultural, Inclusive Teaching-Learning Space

Our OOPS! – an *open online participatory seminar* – focused on intercultural, inclusive learning and teaching (we called this MILT – Multicultural Inclusive Learning and Teaching) in a virtual professional development space for higher education professionals (e.g., teachers, student support professionals, and pedagogical administrators across disciplines, crossing geographic, cultural and personal borders). The focus was on learning, sharing, and developing pedagogical practices agile and robust enough to support the broad range of learners enrolled in our colleges, programs and courses. Participants worked together to re-examine and expand individual, collective, collegial and cultural ideas about *what* we teach, *how* we attend to *who* is in the classroom, *when* we address tensions/conflicts, *where* to be transparent, and *why* all this matters. We held in mind three pedagogical goals:

- seeing *teacher* as convener, facilitator, participant, advocate, adversary, lecturer, recorder, hub, researcher, organizer, authority,
- pluralizing theories *and* pedagogies supporting our course design just as we would see students in the plural in terms of demographics, identity, interests, liminality (Burker & Crozier, 2012; Waite, et al, 2012); and
- enhancing the relationship between facilitators and participants through collaboration, co-construction, and critical and reflective reflection within dialogue (Beaty, et al, 2002).

This mindset guided us in the development of the five overarching seminar aims, upon which we aligned (Biggs and Tang, 2011) selection of seminar materials, development of discussion prompts, and constructionist badge-related activities with associated frameworks for feedback and assessment:

- **Interact** with – respond to, analyse, discuss – readings in a reflective practice mode, reviewing via multiple lenses, considering diverse perspectives, addressing personal contexts, imagining professional possibilities.
- **Develop** a personal – contextual, robust and dynamic – understanding of MILT through participation in discussion forums and activity workshops.
- **Engage** ideas in multiple ways – spoken, verbal, visual/audio, and written – in order to create teaching/learning activities and/or artefacts.
- **Apply** core course design constructs – course alignment, universal design for learning, and a range of critical multicultural pedagogical principles – to one’s teaching roles and learning responsibilities.
- **Stretch** to create among ourselves – and beyond this course – learning spaces akin to those we seek for our students as we exchange and expand our viewpoints through our new interactions.

We designed the beta version of the seminar (offered Spring Semester 2015 with a broader launch coming in Fall 2016) with these aims.

Also, we built on our experiences within cMOOCs and pMOOCs – connectivist and project-based MOOCs. Each of us participated in online learning spaces using these modes, and one of us as a consultant in design of a Coursera xMOOC. (Examples of our participation include the following: CMC11, FSLT12, FSLT13, MocoMoco, OLDS MOOC, EC&I 831, and Coursera’s Sustainability of Food Systems.) From these experiences, we aimed for creating a platform that would allow participants to choose among multiple modes of participation – from enrolled for credit, to badge-earning, to participation in peer discussion within or beyond the OOPS! space, and on to dipping in for reading, uploading, downloading materials that supported an individual’s further *lurking* (the action of lurking for learning). A Moodle site supported all who registered for the seminar in accessing discussion forums, open resources, and badge-earning activities including peer exchange and feedback; the addition of a YouTube channel and course blog made it possible to share seminar materials in an open access mode. In all, 70 participants signed up for the seminar in response to our limited email and social network postings. More than half of the registered participants ventured into at least two of the six modules, with 12 earning course credit for participation in all modules and each of the four badge activities list below:

- 0 Welcome / Induction
- 1 **Who** In the World Are We?
- 2 **What** is MILT? / Badge 1 – Philosophy Statement
- 3 **Why** Begin with Learning and Learners? / Badge 2 – Assignment Design

- 4 **When** Do Words Fail Us?
- 5 **How** Do Discussions Become Dialogic? / Badge 3 – Discussion Reflection
- 6 **Where** do MILT and Course Design Align? / Badge 4 – Course Design

Within each module we incorporated 2-3 open resources as seeds for participant-driven discussions that we hoped would – and did – become the main course content in module discussion forums, and badge activity exchanges of artefacts and feedback. (See Figure 1, below.) The springboards – short writings we called meta-essays synthesized core theory/history/praxis ideas into a 2-page, hyperlinked essay, or video-based resources we scripted or invited to showcase intercultural learning and teaching ideas developed within our own networks, and curated publications that allowed us to embed an intercultural array of authors troubling learning and teaching – as supports for learning. While we designed the full course in advance, we also re-designed and integrated new resources as we learned about our own seminar participants – who came equally from science, education, and liberal arts departments; identified across multiple sexualities, ethnicities, genders, home places, teaching spaces, class backgrounds, and family affiliations.

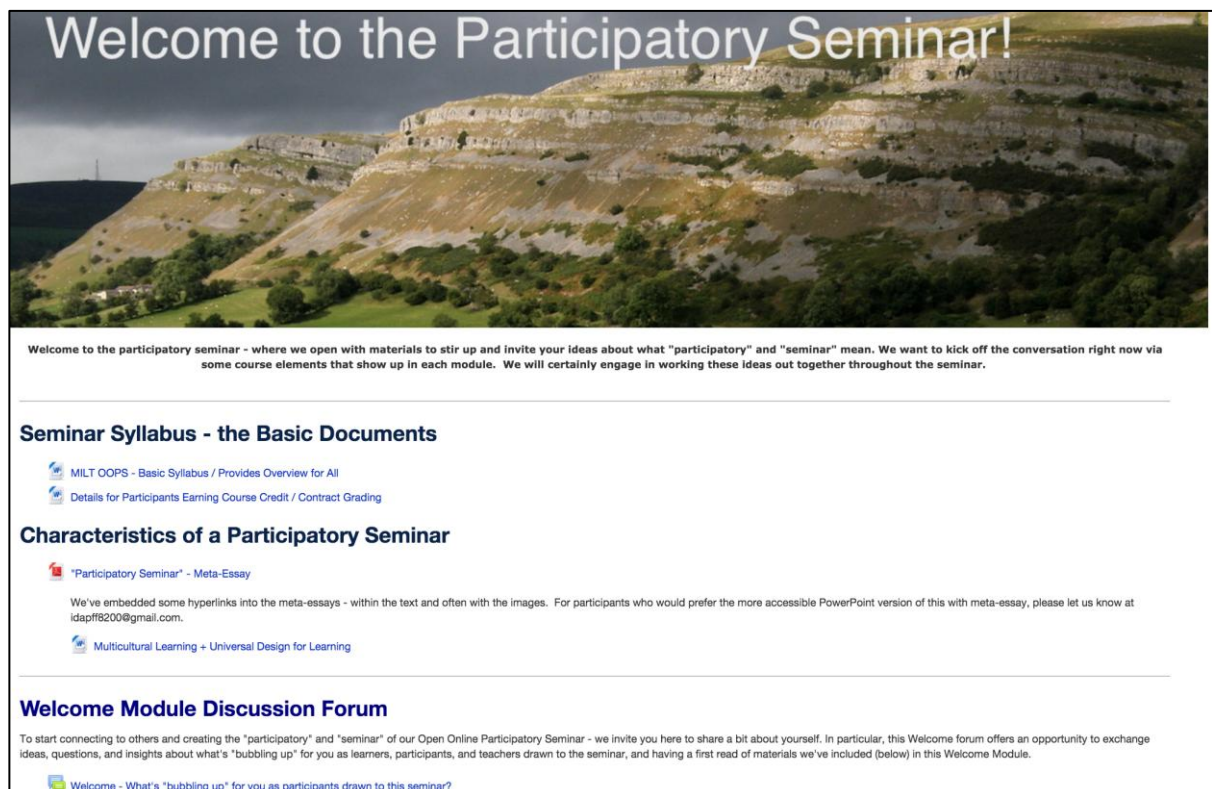


Figure 1: Sample Module Page

In this way, we conceived of each module as a learning circle space (Wallace, 2011, p. 12) – foundational to Highlander Folk School’s racially- (and class-, gender-, age-, education-, and sexuality-) integrated workshops. Now called the Highlander Research and Education Center, the centre is a place where people “come together to interact, build friendships, craft joint strategy and develop the tools and mechanisms needed to advance a multi-racial, inter-generational movement for social and economic justice” (<http://highlandercenter.org/about-us/>). Learning circles have consistently been at the core of Highlander’s practice, with founder Myles Horton saying this of learning and circles in a conversation with Paulo Freire:

I think of an educational workshop as a circle of learners. "Circle" is not an accidental term, for which there is no head of the table at Highlander workshops; everybody sits around in a circle. The job of the staff members is to create a relaxed atmosphere in which the participants feel free to share their experiences. Then they are encouraged to analyse, learn from and build on these experiences. Like other participants in the workshops, staff members are expected to share experiences that relate to the discussions, and sources of information and alternative suggestions. (Horton, et al, 1990, p. 150)

In face-to-face classrooms, the three learning circle rounds are based on an actively reflective, idea-building sequence of What? So What? and Now What? questions. Facilitators prepare “open-ended questions designed to elicit answers that draw creatively on experiences and interests that participants bring, on a topic that you know is alive for them” (Wallace, 2011, p. 13). Planning thoughtfully scripted questions allows facilitators time for “thinking through what the overall shape and sequence of discussions is going to be, what questions and what texts or videos to [use to] set up questions . . . , and draft the wording or at least important parts of the wording of the questions with those plans in mind” (Wallace, 2011, p. 14). Each stage of a learning circle can be structured in multiple ways for multiple learning space formats, and generally start from this pattern: the facilitator poses a question; in turn, participants express thoughts that surface in response to the question as well as ideas that take shape in listening to others; as all individuals have responded – or chosen to pass at their turn, that round of a learning circle opens to questions, clarifications, amplification, and further reflection in cross-talk as part of sense-making in the exchange of stories listened to and ideas expressed. During each of the three rounds, facilitators take turns in responding to the question, and choosing when as well as how to enter the cross-talk. Expected to be acute listeners, facilitators often act improvisationally in developing new, next prompts based on how the discussion is, or is not, unfolding one round at a time (Elbow, 1983; Wallace, 2011).

Our decision to build an OOPS! with learning circles in mind links to contemporary work by Dennen (2008), and Pentland (2014) investigating patterns of effective discussion in multiple learning spaces. Both underscore the importance of short, overlapping, dense interactions via comments generated in response to discussion prompts. Dennen adds that in-built practices of meta-cognitive reflection further support knowledge creation and longterm learning. Pentland adds that discussion practices of high-performing cooperative groups come to understandings of why or whether to validate or invalidate emergences of consensus and dissent. With Elbow, Wallace, Dennen, and Pentland in mind, we named the OOPS! discussion process as improvisation, asking students to “yes, and” their way into sharing what bubbled up in responding to springboard course materials, discussion prompts, previous experiences (whether cognitive/affective/ embodied, personal/professional/public), and others’ words. Learners took this very seriously; most conversations took a tone of expansion and seeking understanding, even when contentious issues arose.

The pedagogical literature is rich in scholarship that frames and showcases teaching philosophies that support a broad range of learners engaging together in the work of intercultural – or multicultural inclusive – learning in principle and practice. We drew on Chávez’s six elements of an empowering multicultural leaning environment (Table 1, below) to guide our design – and as an reading early in the seminar. Of the communities she studied, Chávez notes, “teachers worked with all students to create collective, empowering learning experiences that utilized and honoured multicultural realities within a shared and rigorous academic experience” (2007, p. 278).

Safety	respect and support for individuals in making room for respectful confrontation and minimization of the effects of hierarchy
Risk Taking	given the broad range of learning preferences, experiential perspectives, and needs related to exploring ideas in a classroom, facilitators and participants work together in an “uncomfortable process of bringing issues and ideas out into the realm of respectful dialogue [which] distinguishes an empowering learning community” (p. 281)
Congruence	course materials are both consistent with expressed aims, and reflect realities of the <i>broad range</i> of participants
Proactivity	proactivity “brings with it a need to utilize a diversity of knowledge, methods, styles, and relationships in various processes” (p. 283)
Multiplicity	embodied learning, which calls on minds and hearts, physicality and spirit are factors in facilitators’ course design, becomes a factor as facilitators infuse courses with “a multiplicity of ways of knowing, knowledge sources, realities, relationships, and experiences” (p. 283)
Reciprocity	involves learners and facilitators as <i>stewards</i> developing new knowledge rather than as standard bearers guarding knowledge traditions, and as <i>allies</i> in the creation of new knowledges and meanings in the interaction of ideas crossing personal, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries in cognitive and affective realms

Table 1: Chávez (2007) Elements of an Empowering Multicultural Leaning Environment

As at Highlander, we aimed to create an OOPS! learning and teaching space that made movement possible for all participants – facilitators and participants together as *lurners*, or learners who actively choose to lurk at points in their learning. Learners and lurners often began by interacting with content we posted, but soon

shifted conversations in other directions as they brought their experiences to bear and thus surfaced other questions and points of tension. Learners brought other resources to the table that expanded, and sometimes challenged, those we had posted. In this way our materials often served only as a starting point – a learning circle prompt – with the content itself primarily created through interactions between learners and the experiences and resources they contributed in discussions. We initially tried to create collaborative bibliographies in Google Drive Documents, but soon found that learners preferred to post and discuss these resources in the forums, precisely because there was an opportunity to connect them to others' experiences and to engage in a deeper dialogue. The discussions became engaging enough that forum posts continued after the close of a forum, or the discussions were continued into the next week's forum.

This also shifted our roles in the course. Though we jointly created, commissioned, and/or selected the resources that spurred initial conversation, we quickly recognized we were taking on different instructional roles. Ilene often reading posts through Brookfield's four lenses of critically reflective teaching then drawing on student, peer, literature, or personal experiences to provide further resources or synthesis or considerations in the forums. Alex, with fewer years of experience teaching, often came with his own curiosities and questions that prodded conversation, much like other students. While we ultimately assigned grades and issued badges, learners provided feedback on each other's work, which they drew on in revising *and* in developing a self-assessment using samples instruments. The exchange of feedback as well as the mindful reviewing of it as part of a revision process further fostered a sense of peer collaboration. Rather than prioritising a traditional student/teacher relationship, this approach joined instructors and participants together as learners engaged in feedback, and with roles in the assessment loops. Rather than *illuminating the way* or *getting out of the way*, conceptualising this in-between space made it possible for us to find *ways into* participating by listening to what bubbled up in us, by lurking within the densely-voiced forums, by reflecting on questions that wrangled into place through various threads, and by discerning why, when, and where to enter the interchange.

Looking Forward – from the Middest of Data Analysis

Writing now we are in the middest – the middle and the midst – of data crunching in that reflective pedagogical space between the Spring 2015 beta run of this open online participatory seminar, and preparation for its Fall 2016 full launch. We are, therefore, deep in the work of collating, coding, and analysing data along four paths:

- participant feedback across the course including Likert-scale and open-ended evaluations of teaching;
- discussion forum interactions of six content modules and two peer feedback badge;
- drafted and revised participant documents created and responded to in completing badge activities; and
- development of a Graph Analysis as we work with an Academic Technology Support Services colleague preparing a graph analysis that will make use of discussion forum logs (exported from the learning management system, Moodle, in their entirety), with this information being used to identify key vertices independent of qualitative analysis of the discussions.

In closing, we'll address initial analysis of participant feedback regarding learning/learner roles and facilitator/teacher roles through data drawn from seminar surveys, and then close with a look at what we will provide in a folder to supplement this paper.

Data Snapshot: Seminar Survey Items

One question in a early-seminar survey invited participants to share perceptions about discussion as a way of learning, asking, "When you participate in class discussions, what tends to get you to 'step forward' into the conversation?" With word cloud visualizations and thematic analysis, we devised a paraphrase characterising participant responses, which overwhelmingly focused on discussions in the teaching-learning context: *We will appreciate participants' learning and teaching experiences, ideas and questions in conversation.*

At this point, the majority of participants would have previously engaged in face-to-face discussions with multidisciplinary colleagues (as alums of PFF's "Teaching in Higher Education" course), and would have just read the Welcome Module's "Characteristics of a Participatory Seminar" meta-essay, which concluded by listing from Dennen (2008) and Pentland (2014) characteristics central to motivating "discussion for learning" in an online environment: inviting dense interactions, diversity of ideas, and meta-cognitive reflection. By the end of the course, regularly engaged participants took part in up to six forum and four badge discussions (totalling some 9,570 views among ~30 regularly active learner/learner participants); the six forum discussions featured "thick threads"; that is, an average of 9 discussion threads (ranging from 6 to 11) per forum were

Rather than engaging only in "safe" topics (related specifically to STEM fields or on subjects that I felt experienced in) I began to seek out discussions from people in vastly different fields. I started to grasp onto threads that were less familiar to me and ask myself "what about that? How could I address this in my classroom?" I started to engage more in "yes, and" conversation rather than simply stating my thoughts in essay form. I listened more.... From this deeper engagement, some new creative thoughts began to develop: thoughts on making safe spaces, thoughts on sharing resources with students, thoughts on new methods of group discussion, thoughts on even developing a curriculum or book on inclusive science history. These thoughts were shaped and guided by my discussion partners and broke me out of my pattern of assumptions. I realized that there was a much broader range of issues to be addressed than even the ones that I had felt were under-valued in my own department. The encouragement and engagement of my colleagues led me down these paths, and I'm still finding others. (Physics.)

In the official course-closing Student Ratings of Teaching, one participant's response to an open-ended question – "It was clear that [Ilene and Alex] were really wanting an honest discussion, not just looking for the 'right answer.'" – reflects our overall sense that we met our goal of creating an online community climate. The selection of course materials, crafting of springboard discussion prompts, and our own reflectively honest responding within the forums, did invite participants to step forward, to stretch to create the bulk of course content by seeking to learn more with and because of one another.

As the centrepiece of our course, module and badge forums integrated cognitive and affective, personal and professional, learner and teacher, public and personal dimensions of learning. In coding forum data we do gain now a greater sense of "how" the participatory foundations worked for those who wrote their presence into the discussions. We will be setting up a focus group to learn more about "how" these online discussions impacted small clusters of student affairs/advising learners who were active readers within the seminar, but then moved into personalised face-to-face discussions beyond the seminar.

That participants quickly developed "thick thread"/"yes, and..." discussion patterns remains heartening as we review feedback data, and review quantitative participation data to gain an overall view of discussions. This supports our sense that the seminar supported people-people networked learning within its forums. In addition, preliminary reviews of late modules (on dialogic discussion and course design) point to ways that participants in general carried the conversational substance and practices in their daily teaching learning lives.

Closing this Loop

In many ways, the U.S. higher education context is our problem, as Teaching Professional Development is almost entirely optional, and then typically addressed through one-shot, hour-long workshops and/or one-semester mentoring programs for new teaching assistants (TAs), or as one day of a new faculty orientation programming as the academic year begins. Some universities support teaching centre programming including semester- or year-long learning communities organized around faculty career stages (early- and mid-career), emergent instructional practices (flipped classrooms, serial teaching, teaching across difference), and/or varieties of postgraduate/postdoctoral teaching professional development programming. The UMinnesota Preparing Future Faculty Program (PFF), which sponsors our OOPS! as one of several offerings, is an example of the latter option. A further problem across these offerings is that multicultural, intercultural, and inclusive teaching is typically an item to be addressed rather than an infused, integral element of learning and teaching.

Our initial OOPS! involved acts of curating, collating, and considering resources to compose a course design that would address these gaps by supporting aims we've noted at the start of this paper. The seminar data are helping us to understand how we did engage new and experienced university teachers and staff in MILT-related academic professionals development. We are beginning to see where we missed opportunities to strengthen people-material connections, how we might make bridges with learners, and how we make room for world and local events that impact participants' thinking and acting as MILT practitioners.

Among the decisions to be made as we enter into a next design cycle that will revamp modules within this open boundary course are determining what will shift in moving from essentially seven to five modules (welcome plus four topical modules), and ascertaining whether new campus affordances for synchronous video sessions and/or video-based asynchronous exchanges would support interactions the modules while also allowing for some form of the face-to-face engagement participants have noted as a desirable addition. Given this on-going

activity, we will be stashing new data analyses, graphical visualizations, and syllabus revision work in our public MILT OOPS! folder: <http://z.umn.edu/MiltOOPSpublic> as part of updating this paper.

"Why can [a community of classroom] not be treated as a consciously experienced set of conditions and surroundings, where people can come to understand the nature of society by examining the conflict situations and the crises thrust upon them, in their own personal lives? If this were the orientation, the...teachers would not and could not be visiting 'experts,' assigned to transmit bits of some commodity called knowledge.... Those participating as learners would bring with them the experiential material, the backgrounds, the problems worthy of investigation. The responsibility of the teacher...would be to promote understanding of the learners' lives, sensitivity to injustice, future thinking about a better world." (Horton, p. 243)

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