

Teaching Public Health with a Pedagogy of Collegiality

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to engage readers in thinking purposefully about Masters in Public Health (MPH) curriculum development that effectively meets the complex challenges of the 21st century. Current approaches to training the public health workforce do not adequately prepare professionals to be culturally competent as a means of addressing health disparities. Principles of community-based participatory research highlight the importance of building relationships of mutual accountability and give precedent to collegial teaching. After presenting background and theoretical foundations for a pedagogy of collegiality, the authors describe specific teaching methods, classroom activities and key assignments organized around four essential features: 1. Principles of Community Organizing; 2. Building Community - Valuing Diversity; 3. Engaging the Senses; and 4. Writing Across the Curriculum.

Teaching Public Health with a Pedagogy of Collegiality

Introduction

Training the public health workforce to *fulfill society's interest in assuring conditions in which people can be healthy*¹ calls for a paradigm shift in teaching methods and classroom philosophy. A critique of conventional pedagogy notes that top-down approaches do not foster collegiality between students and teachers²⁻⁷ or invoke the primacy of culture in health interventions.^{8,9} The mission of public health engages social justice^{10,11} as it applies a systematic approach to health improvement¹² and reducing health disparities.¹³ Demographic shifts, coupled with growing evidence of health disparities among low-income multicultural populations underscore the need for democratic, community-based, culturally competent pedagogy. *Pedagogy of collegiality* responds to this need with an approach that values diversity and creatively organizes the classroom community to develop effective learning environments where an ecological framework is learned and practiced. The article opens a discussion of best teaching processes¹⁴ for professional socialization in public health that effectively respond to the concerns cited in the Institute of Medicine's report: *Who Will Keep the Public Healthy? Educating Health Professionals for the 21st Century?*¹⁵ The paper aims to engage readers in thinking purposefully about curriculum development and teaching techniques that create dynamic learning processes and strengthen Master of Public Health (MPH) student capacities. After presenting background and theoretical foundations for "Pedagogy of Collegiality," the authors describe specific teaching methods, classroom activities and key assignments organized around four essential features: 1. Principles of Community Organizing; 2. Building Community - Valuing Diversity; 3. Engaging the Senses; and 4. Writing Across the Curriculum.

Pedagogy of collegiality transforms the curriculum to include the student voice and create a balanced environment for learning public health. The goal of pedagogy of collegiality is to establish an educational setting that fosters an open and free exchange of ideas. The term *pedagogy* captures the full experience of learning, including content, methods,

student learning styles, and context. The term *collegiality* describes a relationship that embodies mutual learning and shifts the center of attention from the teacher to the students, and back again so that all may become members of a community of learners. This approach was introduced as a new model for youth-adult media production¹⁶ and applied to teaching in the Master's in Public Health (MPH) program at San Francisco State University (SFSU). Modeling progressive education since the 1970's, pedagogy of collegiality is rooted in critical education and feminist theories.

Paolo Freire & Critical Education Theory

Pedagogy of collegiality comes from a long legacy of progressive educational movements starting with John Dewey,¹⁷ Miles Horton,¹⁸ and others.¹⁹ Freire's^{2,3} theory of critical education, also known as "praxis," emphasizes *conscientization*, the process of developing critical consciousness about oppression, building empowerment and working towards social change.⁴ Freire viewed both education and research as political venues where power operates and reproduces itself in the social domain²⁰ and wrote extensively about enriching the educational content of teaching processes through joint decision-making and collective learning. His theory and methods, developed originally from literacy work with peasants in Africa and South America, have been re-articulated in the U.S. by many of his students.^{4-7, 21, 22-29} A significant tenet of Freire's pedagogical thought is the spirit of "reinventing" what it means to be a democratic teacher in our own specific context.²⁵ The role of the teacher in this process is to facilitate critical dialogue about social conditions, motivate students to reflect upon their lives and take action. In *Education is Politics*²³ Ira Shor explains, "students are not empty vessels to be filled with facts, or sponges to be saturated with official information, or vacant bank accounts to be filled with deposits from the required syllabus" (p. 26). The role of students is to experience education as something they do, not as something done to them.

In public health, Freire's approach has been put into practice through community interventions,²⁹⁻³¹ curriculum and youth development,^{32,33} community assessment,³⁴⁻³⁶ and evaluation research.³⁷ Freire is credited as a founder of the *participatory* approach in community-based participatory research (CBPR).³⁸ CBPR in public health is a

collaborative process that equitably involves all partners and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings.^{21,39} Principles of CBPR⁴⁰ highlight the importance of building relationships of mutual accountability and give precedent to teaching public health with a pedagogy responsive to diversity. Findings from a recent baseline assessment of Schools of Public Health⁴¹ call for a greater emphasis on CBPR, and providing graduates with increased skills in cultural competency, leadership and advocacy. Combined with *Practice-Based Teaching*,⁴² pedagogy of collegiality is a framework capable of representing the complexity of public health⁴³ beyond the Western paradigm.^{9,44}

Feminist Pedagogy & Women’s Health Movement

At the time Freire was writing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in Brazil, women in the United States were active in the women’s health and civil rights movements, exchanging experiences and exposing injustices in women’s lives through consciousness-raising workshops.⁴⁵⁻⁴⁷ Unique to the women's health movement was interactive reflection linking health status, personal experience, and political processes.⁴⁸ Feminist pedagogy came out of this genre of consciousness-raising education with the explicit political agenda of reducing women’s isolation, building community empowerment, and shifting the site of knowledge creation.⁴⁹⁻⁵²

Women-centered models forge synergistic new approaches that ultimately may be best suited for the complex times in which we live.⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰ Feminist educators’ methods focus on spatial dynamics in the classroom to physically address power imbalances between teacher and students.⁵¹ Feminist pedagogy assumes a continuum of nurture-authority and locates itself on the nurture side of the spectrum.⁵³ It is rooted in relationships and encourages interaction; students examine and value their life experiences as sources of knowledge and share those experiences with each other. Feminist educators cite Freire as the educational theorist who comes closest to the goals of feminist pedagogy.^{7,51} Both frameworks raise consciousness about social conditions that determine the distribution of privilege and oppression.⁵⁴⁻⁵⁶ Scholar bell hooks⁵⁷ notes,

“More than any other movement for social justice in our society, the feminist movement was exemplary in promoting forms of critique that

challenge white-supremacist thought on the level of theory and practice (page 71).”

Essential Features: Application of Pedagogy of Collegiality

The Institute of Medicine’s report on educating Health Professionals for the 21st Century notes that MPH students must be taught a framework for action and an understanding of the forces that impact health, emphasizing the linkages and relationships among multiple determinants affecting health.¹⁵ At SFSU, such framework means linking public health with the political activism of historically oppressed groups, such as African Americans in the civil rights movement, Mexican and Pilipino farm-workers in environmental justice, gays and lesbians in the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS, and women and youth in violence/injury control. The result is teaching public health through the lens of community organizing; MPH students shift away from a strict biomedical focus on illness and disease to an explicit language of social justice, cultural competence and human rights (Figure 1: Course Outline).

The essential features of pedagogy of collegiality encompass a range of teaching strategies, classroom activities and key assignments based on the application of critical and feminist pedagogy (Figures 2 and 3: Essential Features). Each feature incorporates experiential learning and critical thinking skills. The first feature, “Principles of Community Organizing,” integrates principles of listening, relationship building, challenge, action, reflection, evaluation and celebration into an ecological framework. The second feature, “Building Community - Valuing Diversity,” reflects a commitment to multicultural education that respects diverse learning styles and promotes open communication between the instructor and students. The third feature, “Engaging the Senses,” emphasizes the use of creative arts (music, drawing, video, etc.) as original tools to garner student participation. The last feature, “Writing Across the Curriculum,” stems from the need to strengthen graduate students’ communication skills and provides opportunities for reflection. The overall goal of these characteristics is for students to see themselves as health leaders grounded in scientific data as well as in community experience. The essential features of pedagogy of collegiality have been articulated through student course evaluations. Excerpts from this data are included.

Principles of Community Organizing

Principles of community organizing are developed from various sources^{58,59} and applied to teaching the introductory course in public health at SFSU. These seven principles – *listening, relationships, challenge, action, reflection, evaluation and celebration* – are central to public health practice. They allow MPH students to see themselves in a larger context as agents of change while maintaining the importance of self-reflection and “place” within a community. During the first four weeks of instruction the professor leads a range of experiential and didactic exercises that enhance *listening* and *build relationships*. Students learn the value of developing trust and mutual respect as precursors to community assessment, program planning and evaluation. The class identifies the ways speaking is privileged over listening in mainstream culture and practice collaborative learning through the use of “dyads,” a approached used extensively in education since the 1970s.^{60,61} A dyad is a purposeful, timed, conversation between two people. Students pair up to share their opinions about a particular topic prior to a large group discussion. In this way all class members have an opportunity to listen and be heard. One student recalls,

“In the beginning I did not feel comfortable with this style of teaching. I was used to listening to the lecture, reading and writing. It seems that I was acting like a machine or a computer. But now, I’ve realized my voice and it’s empowering.”

The next eight weeks are taught collegially between professor and students. The professor and students co-teach sessions on health and social justice, CBPR, issue selection, media advocacy, ethics, social support, and global health. Here, principles of *challenge* and *action* require students to develop and apply problem solving and critical thinking skills. Students also study non-violence as a health promotion practice and learn how to apply a participatory framework for personal and community empowerment.

“I appreciated the community framework that was woven throughout the entire class. We were learning about community organizing while actually being a community.”

During the final weeks of the semester the last three principles, *evaluation, reflection* and *celebration* are applied. Assessment of student work includes peer review, written and verbal feedback. Assessment of teaching includes student evaluations as well as reflection opportunities, through journal writing, small group discussions and process observation. The last opportunity for reflection is a community circle where students present an object that symbolizes community and/or health and share its significance in relation to the class. Taking the time to develop this “sacred space” has produced mutual accountability and a sustainable community beyond the semester experience. The class concludes with a formal program of student presentations and a festive ambiance.

“The warm community we created was the cornerstone of this experience. We could feel safe, comfortable and able to be ourselves. I was challenged in so many ways and came away feeling inspired, energized and passionate about public health.”

Building Community – Valuing Diversity

Building community is an essential feature that values diverse learning styles. Peer education and ongoing involvement of a graduate student teaching assistant have been evaluated by students as “the most helpful in building community, learning to work together and treating each other as colleagues.” Inclusion of students in multiple roles within the classroom fosters a sense of camaraderie and cohesiveness. Students learn that they are not simply receptacles for information; rather they are an integral part of the learning process.

Peer education honors diverse learning styles and facilitates developing partnerships between faculty and students. The educational process is enriched when students participate and assume pedagogical roles among their peers.⁶² Peer education emphasizes critical thinking skills as well as rhetorical skills of discussion, group collaboration, debate and public speaking. To maximize participation, students work in groups of three to design and lead a weekly discussion of assigned readings in a limited time frame.

“ I felt involved in every class, even when I thought I did not feel ready or willing to get involved. My involvement level was high because of

the way the class was designed – there were just so many opportunities to participate, I just had to.”

Graduate Student Teaching Assistants, such as the co-authors of this essay, are essential to pedagogy of collegiality. Teaching assistants (TA's) are volunteers who receive academic credit for facilitating class discussion while providing a space for students to explore their own thoughts. TA's meets weekly with the professor to discuss the upcoming class and shares his/her ideas to enhance the curriculum. They receive mentorship from the professor regarding how to embody collaborative leadership; in turn, TA's provide mentorship to current students on creative active participation and exemplify civic engagement. They show other students what cultural competence looks like through “show, don't tell,” a hallmark of the class, where teacher and teaching assistant model the behavior expected of students.

Engaging the Senses

This feature responds to the mind/body split characteristic of higher education and challenges teachers and students to tackle health disparities through creative, right brain methods that touch our universal humanity. Opening the semester with a classroom that looks, sounds, smells and feels different than what is expected on a college campus can set the tone for pedagogy of collegiality. Imagine music playing in the background and students greeted by a professor with a nametag and a smile. Textiles from various cultures adorn the space; a candle twinkles next to fresh fruit, nuts, cheese, crackers, and bottled water. The senses are captivated, curiosity is sparked and food becomes a catalyst for group cohesion. Being nourished and feeding others is a form of cross-cultural learning that increases the possibility of community building. Discussions around the potluck table are relevant to learning in many ways. Students use the time to exchange information about assignments, personal struggles and accomplishments. Classroom set-up need not be quite as elaborate, the idea is for students to experience pedagogy of collegiality not as a theory espoused by the teacher, but as a practice to awaken consciousness.

Engaging the senses uses artistic expression to provide meaning and facilitate feelings of belonging with the community.⁶³ For example, audiovisual media – videos and music – is used to teach key concepts, stimulate dialogue and create interest. Media play a pivotal role in the development of pedagogical techniques that have organized and disciplined cultures in and beyond schools.⁶⁴ Visual images can document and present people, places, and health issues in innovative ways.³⁴⁻³⁶ Through videos, participants who have historically not been “in the picture” have the opportunity to express their needs, concerns and community assets.⁶⁵ In addition, engaging the senses pays attention to classroom set-up. Students are invited to sit in a circle, in small groups, or in semi-circle seating. As one student declares, “The different methods, teaching approach and the sense of community made me feel I truly belonged. I received insight from others. I felt involved and accepted.”

Writing Across the Curriculum

According to feminist pedagogy, writing as a teaching strategy takes personal experience, knowledge and problem-solving skills into concrete documents that speak the language of power.⁵⁰ The practice of writing across the curriculum⁶⁶ is emphasized throughout the semester as a key ingredient to increased communication skills. Early on, students are informed that democratic education requires they share their writing. In other words, the professor will not be the only one reading their work. By the end of the semester, through “free-writes,” journal writing and other assignments, students view writing as an opportunity for leadership, to organize their thoughts, and develop their voice.

“Free-writes” are silent group discussions that begin with an open-ended question. On a blank piece of paper the class responds to a question and in writing, take a position. Students are encouraged to not censor themselves, worry about grammar or being correct. “Free-writes” are anonymous and encourage critical dialogue about social conditions. To achieve maximum anonymity, students and professor mark their papers with a personal symbol on the right hand corner. After they finish answering the question they lift their hand and exchange papers with other class members. When they read another person’s

“free-write,” they write comments on the paper, raise their hand and exchange it again with another member of the classroom community. After the papers and ideas circulate for 15-20 minutes the professor asks the class to return the paper to its original author. The room is filled with energy, as everyone calls-out the personal symbols. After reading the responses, the class engages in open debate.

Journal writing is offered as a space where students can reflect on their changing membership-roles and goals for professional socialization.^{67,68} Students are responsible for keeping a weekly journal that documents thoughts and feelings. They are encouraged to journal in a way that fits their interests, from simple computer notes to elaborate drawing notebooks. Journals are private and not read by the teacher or other class members. This approach promotes open reflection without the inhibition introduced by traditional grading.

Other assignments include a team project that applies an ecological framework to a leading health indicator, and the community profile, an ethnographic activity that requires students to systematically get to know a community of their choice and examine their membership role as community “outsiders” or “insiders.” Students informally interview community members and learn the importance of listening and documenting the “authentic voice” of the community in a way that acknowledges and respects cultural differences. In addition, students map community capacity⁶⁹ by drawing and writing. Through a series of questions, students begin to visualize the community they will profile; they draw it and write a paragraph describing it. Students show their community map/drawing and read their writing out loud in a “dyad.” The assignment is based on Freire’s recommendation that educators conduct ethnographic research in their students’ community, documenting their linguistic universe, and then drawing “generative themes” and key words from that local culture to elaborate a social analysis.^{2,3,28} Students refer back to this assignment as a pivotal learning experience:

“It’s tremendous to look at our role as insiders or outsiders while studying about health needs and what it means to work in diverse communities. I learned as much about myself as I did about public health.”

Conclusion

This article presented suggestions about educating health professionals for the 21st century who are academically prepared, socially engaged and culturally competent. Teaching public health with a pedagogy of collegiality calls for self-reflective, politically savvy faculty able to train MPH students in “real world” application of community based participatory approaches. In this way, professional preparation can be as subversive as the very discipline it represents. Establishing collegial relationships where there are differences in power, such as between faculty and students, is as much an art as it is a science. While pedagogy of collegiality has been instrumental in youth media, MPH classrooms, and other settings, public health practitioners must be cognizant of its possible limitations and challenges in other community settings.

The techniques outlined in this article require classroom spaces conducive to action oriented teaching – chairs must be able to move, there should be sufficient space for small group discussion, and classroom walls need to effectively contain the sounds of laughter, music and dialogue that are an integral part of the class. Further, it is critical to recognize the institutionally imposed roles of authority that professors in a hierarchical university structure must deal with. The balance of authority/power is at the forefront of planning, implementing and evaluating teaching. Instructors are expected to hold institutional power and be responsible to meet academic goals as they are understood within the wider university.

Master’s in Public Health students are eager to participate in their own learning; they want to gain knowledge and skills, and are prepared to actively shape the policy and programs affecting people’s lives – including their own. Educators are called to teach with “a joy of living and make their classrooms model the kind of world we want to be a part of”⁴ (p.509). As Banner and Cannon⁷⁰ note, a joyless classroom is a huge impediment to learning. Teachers affect the social change process, one student at a time, through pedagogy. With a pedagogy of collegiality students can move beyond learning about health disparities “out there” in the community – to having actual opportunities to

teach each other and experience the act of being a community while investigating the ways their own lives are impacted by health disparities and how social forces operate in and out of the classroom.

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Figure 1: Course Outline
Public Health Through the Lens of Community Organizing

Learning Objectives

MPH students will apply concepts relating to public health as outlined in the weekly schedule below. In addition, they will:

1. Identify their personal value system and style of creative expression.
2. Develop effective interpersonal and cross-cultural communication skills.
3. Recognize concerns regarding cultural stereotypes and address them.
4. Appreciate and apply diverse learning styles to be relevant locally and globally.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1	Course Overview ~ Pedagogy of Collegiality
Week 2	Primary Prevention & Community Based Public Health (CBPH)
Week 3	Health Disparities ~ Ecological Framework
Week 4	Social Justice, Health & Human Rights
Week 5	Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR)
Week 6	Ethical Dilemmas in CBPH and CBPR
Week 7	Social Support, Social Networks and Social Capital
Week 8	Power, Oppression and Privilege
Week 9	Social Action ~ Issue Selection
Week 10	Media Advocacy & Media Literacy
Week 11	International Health: Global Vision – Local Action
Week 12	Principles of Non-Violence
Week 13	Reflection and Evaluation
Week 14	Celebration: Student Presentations
Week 15	Leading Health Indicator paper due

Figure 3: Essential Features of Pedagogy of Collegiality

<i>Essential Features</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Pedagogical Application</i>
Principles of Community Organizing	Listening, building relationships, challenge, action, reflection, evaluation & celebration are central to public health practice.	Communication, trust and mutual respect as course subtexts. Problem solving and critical analysis. Purposeful closure and sustainability.
Building Community - Valuing Diversity	Engage students in a way that acknowledges and respects differences while bringing out similarities.	Attention to diverse learning styles, empowerment and participation. Peer education and teaching assistants model “show, don’t tell” approach.
Engaging the Senses	The use of creative arts and multi-media as tools to garner student participation.	Community mapping, drawing, visualization used to teach concepts, stimulate dialogue and create interest.
Writing Across the Curriculum	Writing as a tool for leadership development and increased communication skills.	Free writes, journaling, ethnographic community profiles, peer editing, students critique each other’s work.

Figure 2: Essential Features of Pedagogy of Collegiality

