

Practicing Liberatory Pedagogy in a Graduate School of Public Health

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Abstract

Public health curricula is shaped by accreditation requirements that largely emphasize technical and professional skills and less so community engagement. Community engagement, however, is a necessary skill for working together to disrupt the root causes of injustice that impact a community's health. Liberatory pedagogy is an approach that can facilitate community engagement in the classroom and orient students to social justice. A team of students, staff, faculty, and community members at the University of Illinois Chicago developed the Community-Engaged Teaching Initiative with three different program components that each uniquely incorporated six principles of liberatory pedagogy: raising critical consciousness, utilizing generative themes, engaging in problem-posing, emphasizing praxis, embracing dialogue, and practicing love in the learning space. This conceptual paper details our model of liberatory pedagogy and simultaneously shows how this framework can be adapted into graduate school curricula in a multitude of ways. We conclude with considerations for educators interested in radicalizing the next generation of public health. Ultimately, our most challenging lessons arose from resisting the normative policies and practices of academia that reinforce the exclusion of community members from public health and higher education.

Introduction

Schools of Public Health (SPHs) train students to confront a broad range of public health issues ranging from infectious disease outbreaks to systemic issues like income inequality. Designing curricula that cover a range of theory, content, and methods is challenging because the curricula must also align with accreditation criteria determined by the Council on Education for Public Health. To be accredited, programs tailor their curricula for standardized competencies that focus on technical and professional skills such as identifying evidence-based approaches, understanding public health and healthcare systems, and designing population-specific programs (Council on Education for Public Health, 2024). Less frequently mentioned is community engagement, an equally critical component to improving a community's health. How accreditation and other academic pressures shape education and community engagement is important to understand in order to do public health work oriented towards justice.

The first prominent limitation of accreditation is that it reinforces the value placed on technical knowledge and professional skills, sometimes over the knowledge of community members who have lived experiences with public health topics.

The early public health workforce was based on workers' connectedness to communities as the foundation for advancing social justice movements and improving community health (Krieger & Birn, 1998; Fee, 2015). Current-day public health jobs, by contrast, emphasize certifications, credentials, and technical skills and approaches. This reinforces a knowledge hierarchy in which those with more degrees and credentials are seen as being more informed about health topics and leads to a workforce that may not have as strong connections with community (Fairchild et al., 2010).

Second, in order to meet accreditation competencies, instructors often leverage traditional pedagogical approaches like the "banking model" of education whereby instructors are the experts who prepare lectures for students and community members to absorb (Freire, 1970). These methods can stifle the creativity, critical thinking, and relationship building that are equally important to sustainably advancing public health (Dos Santos, 2009). To do community engagement, students and partners alike must be considered as having knowledge and experience to contribute to collaborative learning for all.

Third, much of current-day community engagement is notably de-coupled from its radical

and political roots. Ella Baker, African American civil rights activist, argued that radical thinking, or “getting down to and understanding the root cause” is the precursor to disrupting persistent injustices (1969, p. 655). Community engagement, then, stands to be the most effective when coupled with root-cause thinking to disrupt systems of oppression like capitalism, classism, racism, and patriarchy that are at the root of health injustice. The accreditation system and the workforce at large does not prioritize identifying and advocating for radical political, social, or economic policies that will ultimately improve the health of diverse populations. Given these barriers, community engagement must be adequately theorized in order to disrupt the structural challenges within academic and public health itself and work towards justice more broadly.

John Dewey’s service learning and Paulo Freire’s liberatory education are among the most prominent community-engaged teaching frameworks. Both frameworks emphasize real-world curricula applications and reject university elitism, yet they differ in their goals for community engagement and societal transformation (Deans, 1999). Service learning has traditionally focused on improving student learning through volunteerships in which university students have time and knowledge to give to community partners (Deans, 1999; Mitchell, 2008). In terms of social transformation, however, service learning is most focused on challenging traditional classroom norms (Howard, 1998; Clayton & Ash, 2004) and less on resisting broader social structures that drive social injustices at large (Swords & Kiely, 2010). When implemented without a critical lens, the service learning framework can unintentionally perpetuate power differentials between community members and the academy, leading to uneven benefits between those involved (Mitchell & Humphries, 2007; Kanj, 2024).

In recent decades, there has been a growing application of liberatory education as an approach to community-engaged teaching in university settings (Ackerman, 2020; Bernal-Munera, 2023; Dalmage & Martinez, 2020; Reed, 2023). This is notable because Freire himself argued that liberatory education in the U.S. would be exceptionally difficult given that the U.S. education system is designed to maintain power differentials across race and class (Freire & Macedo, 1987). At the same time, the application of Freire’s work has become so widespread that it is often undertheorized. Some literature has extended the

theoretical foundations of liberatory education., including Swords and Kiely (2010) who theorize critical pedagogy as part of social movement building within and beyond the university; Santiago-Ortiz (2018) who points out the growing integration of feminist and anti-racist principles in the university but the absence of anti-colonial methods; and Tinkler (2010), who calls for attention to meaningful community collaborations, particularly with grassroots organizations, to work towards the challenging goal of knowledge co-creation. In this conceptual paper, we offer a model for institutionalizing liberatory pedagogy in the university and share considerations for those seeking to conduct liberatory pedagogy within higher education settings, especially within the health sciences where examples are more limited (Bernal-Munera, 2023; Wiggins, 2012; Wiggins & Pérez, 2017). This paper does not detail the evaluation of our liberatory pedagogy model, as this will be shared in a forthcoming paper.

Positioning Ourselves In the Work

Reflexivity around identities, biases, and resulting power differentials is critical to anti-oppressive research and practice (Muhammad et al., 2015). Therefore, we use the first-person perspective in our writing to acknowledge ourselves as inherently positioned with different experiences and forms of power. Our work involved a group of faculty members, staff, collaborators, and graduate students with diverse educational training, experiences in community engagement, ethnic identities, genders, and class backgrounds. The lead author of this paper was a staff member in the Community Engaged Teaching (CEnT) Initiative and is a first-generation Chicana and Malaysian American trained in critical medical anthropology and grounded theory. The second author is a first-year Black female assistant professor at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) in the SPH and an alumna of this same program where she organized with Radical Public Health (described in detail later in the paper) to advocate for curriculum change during her time as a student. The third, fourth, and fifth authors on this paper were CEnT staff members and include a white female doctoral student with a specialization in community engagement and evaluation who helped organize the Epidemics of Injustice course the past three years and worked as the Community Engagement Facilitator (CEF, described later in the paper) for CEnT for one semester before transitioning to lead the CEnT evaluation; a first-generation

Latina committed to participatory methods who worked as the CEF for two semesters; and a mixed Chinese-Vietnamese-American woman with roots in Chicago and experience in culturally competent student affairs and community engagement who worked as the CEF for two semesters. The sixth author is a white female master's student trained in communication and strategic planning who worked as the teaching assistant for the Epidemics of Injustice course. The senior author of this paper is the lead CEnT faculty member. She is a white female associate professor who is an alumna of UIC and has been using community-engaged teaching approaches since 2010.

Given the distinct personal and professional experiences and levels of institutional power, each author on this paper contributed a different perspective on how the principles of liberatory pedagogy were—and should have been—applied. Our team recognized that the path forward was to work collaboratively to apply critical theory in real-life settings (San Pedro et al., 2017). This required that we practice critical self-reflection and embrace a reflective stance in our individual lives to become clear about our own ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions and develop shared paradigms to move forward together (Kiely & Hartman, 2015; Morrison, 2015). Meaningful collaboration also requires that those with greater institutional power, such as faculty and senior staff, take on additional risks and defend the team's advocacy work when it gets confronted. Thus, in both the writing of this article and in the implementation of the work described, our team built relationships across identity and power differences, which allowed us to explore how we could work together to move toward more liberatory futures in the UIC SPH program and beyond (Macdonald et al., 2022). This exploration has resulted in years-long relationships between each member of our writing team, others within the UIC SPH, and community collaborators.

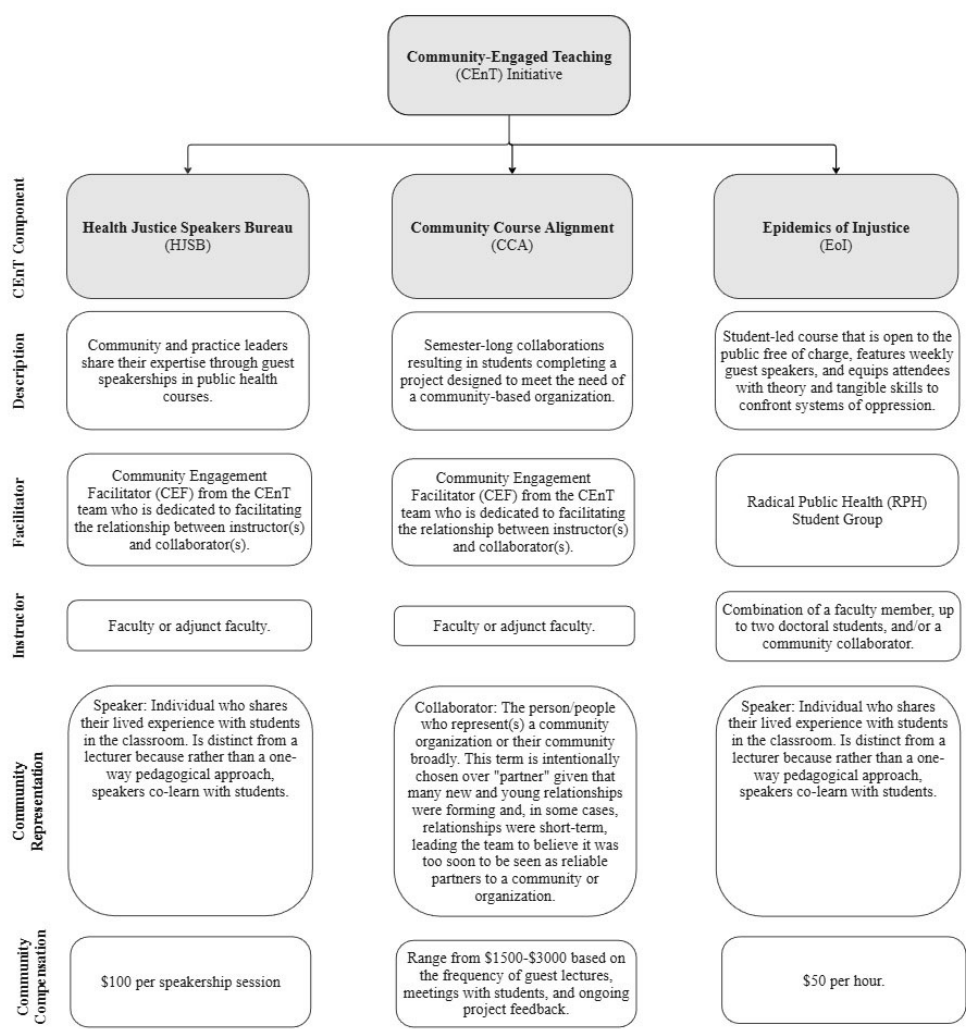
Practicing Liberatory Pedagogy

At the UIC SPH, we developed a liberatory pedagogy program called the Community-Engaged Teaching (CEnT) Initiative that aimed to cultivate a cadre of public health practitioners (students, instructors, and community members) deeply rooted in relationships, community engagement, and social justice principles. CEnT had three different components—Health Justice Speakers Bureau (HJSB), Community Course Alignment (CCA), and a course called Epidemics

of Injustice (EoI) (Figure 1) —and was based in the SPH Dean's Office in order to foster schoolwide community engagement. Within the Dean's Office, it was facilitated by a nascent center called the Collaboratory for Health Justice, which was established to foster reciprocity and power-building with a broad range of community organizations and individuals who play a role in shaping community health. Its reciprocal approach to community engagement is intentionally distinct from service learning or volunteer-based approaches which often fail to interrogate and challenge power differentials (Mitchell & Humphries, 2007; Mitchell, 2008).

Each of the three components applied six core principles of liberatory pedagogy: raising critical consciousness (or “conscientization”), utilizing generative themes, engaging in problem-posing, emphasizing praxis, embracing dialogue, and practicing love in the learning space (Table 1). *Conscientization* is the process of developing students' consciousness around social, political, and economic systems that maintain social difference and injustice (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Freire urged educators to ground curriculum in *generative themes*, topics that reflect oppressive systems and injustices of the current day, to provoke students to examine their own lived experiences (Freire, 1970). Through discussion, Freire asked students to identify the root cause of a problem, a process called *problem-posing*, followed by urging students to imagine ways to disrupt and dismantle the identified problem(s). He incorporated solution-generation into the curriculum not merely as a teaching tool but as part of his philosophy that active participation is important for the creation of a just society. Freire connected classroom learning with action in communities to involve students in actively changing the world. After direct action, students reflect on what they learned and use these lessons to enhance theory. He called this iterative practice of reflection and action *praxis* (Freire, 1970). Students do not acquire lessons independently but rather through *dialogue* with others—during which they share their lived experiences, explore ideas on how to transform themselves and the world, and engage each other in a humanizing process to see each other fully. For a humanizing dialogue, Freire argued that *love* for the world and love for the people be at the center of education (Freire, 1970). While not easy, he taught students to see each other as “unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” through which

Figure 1. The Three Components of the Community-Engaged Teaching (CEnT) Initiative and the Corresponding Participants in Each



students should continuously learn (Freire 1970, p. 57). bell hooks, a student of Freire, elaborated on love as a practice that includes seven parts: care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, trust, and honest and open communication (hooks, 2000, p. 5).

Relying on this theoretical foundation, we recruited community representatives to participate in one or multiple CEnT components. We recruited collaborators and speakers from a schoolwide community engagement survey for instructors, recent collaborators from our COVID-19 pandemic response work, and our personal and professional networks. They represented organizations focused in public health areas like environmental justice, violence prevention, economic empowerment, and food security. In our outreach and recruitment

efforts, we prioritized centering people with lived experience resisting systems of oppression such as those who work in local nonprofits, grassroots organizations, mutual aid efforts, and local campaigns. As Tinkler (2010) has theorized, resident and grassroots organizations can speak to their own experiences from within the community to lay a stronger foundation for digging deeply into the root causes of an issue, making them a better representation of the community than mid-level organizations who are increasingly from outside the community (Tinkler, 2010). In addition, we strived to include folks without advanced degrees because they are rarely extended opportunities to collaborate with academia, despite having relevant knowledge.

Table 1. Application of Liberatory Principles in Each of the Community Engaged Teaching (CEnT) Components

Liberatory Pedagogy Principle		Health Justice Speakers Bureau (HJSB)	Community Course Alignment (CCA)	Epidemics of Injustice (EoI)
Critical consciousness: Developing students' consciousness around social, political, and economic systems that maintain social difference and injustice		Students explore the topic before guests deliver speakerships Speakerships examine the history and politics of a topic	Collaborators orient students to the organization and topic Students explore the topic in depth before beginning the project Students are invited to the organization or community site to witness the work more closely	Each session explores the historical and political background of an issue area
	Generative themes: Topics that reflect current oppressive systems and injustices to provoke students to examine their own lived experiences	Speaker poses questions to students to reflect on how history shapes the speaker and their own current lived experiences	Students and collaborators meet and discuss a health issue and how it manifests in their own lived experiences	All course sessions based on topics of contemporary relevance
	Problem-posing: Identifying the root cause of an issue and generating solutions to disrupt it	Speaker poses questions to students	Students and collaborators discuss the root causes of a health issue	Discussions and assignments focused on identifying root causes of injustice Final project reframes an issue based on its historical and political drivers
	Praxis: Iterative practice of reflection and action	Students are invited to collaborate further with speaker Students are given assignments to reflect on their learning	Collaborators provide ongoing feedback on students' products to continuously shape their learning	Action labs are embedded as opportunities to practice direct action Discussion and assignments encourage reflection on lessons learned
Dialogue: The act of engaging in the humanizing process of sharing lived experiences and exploring ideas on how to transform oneself and the world		Speaker poses questions to students Post-speaker classroom discussion Speakers develop connections and collaborations within SPH and across Chicago	Students and collaborators meet and communicate multiple times to deepen their co-learning	Participants are encouraged to discuss in chat within the virtual classroom (Zoom) Discussion follows guest speakership
	Love: An eagerness to meet people where they are with an understanding that people are on a constant learning journey	CEF creates welcoming and responsive environment for the speaker Students actively engage with the speaker Speakers are compensated and shown gratitude	Time, honesty, an openness to learning deepen the relationship between students and collaborators Collaborators are compensated and shown gratitude	Opens classroom and learning materials to all regardless of ability to pay Students are given flexibility with attendance, deadlines, and grading Upholds language justice through simultaneous Spanish interpretation of sessions

Throughout each collaboration, we worked closely with university faculty to embed liberatory practices into existing courses. To recruit SPH instructors, we sent schoolwide emails, presented at faculty meetings, and had one-on-one conversations with faculty. We designated a team member as the Community Engagement Facilitator (CEF) to enhance recruitment, coordinate logistics, ensure adequate compensation, and facilitate access to university resources to strengthen these growing collaborations. Once the instructors and collaborators were identified, the CEF engaged them in conversation to increase the likelihood of a mutually beneficial collaboration. For all Community Course Alignment (CCA) collaborations, the CEF met with the community collaborator and faculty member to outline the expected time commitment, communications

norms, and project scope—a best practice for establishing shared expectations (Karasik & Hafner, 2022; Rinaldo et al., 2015). Students were not recruited for the initiative but rather participated if they were enrolled in a course for which the instructor participated in CEnT.

We facilitated over 90 guest speakerships through HJSB, 28 collaborations in 15 SPH courses through CCA, and partnered with 62 people for EoI lectures and action labs (Table 2). Collectively, these opportunities were made available to over 2,500 people. In the sections that follow, we describe how each of the six core principles of liberatory pedagogy were applied in our three CEnT components. We reflect on how we have incorporated these principles while noting that this work is ongoing and we continue to learn from it.

Table 2. Total Number of Participants in Each Component of the CEnT Initiative (2021–2024)

Component	Community Collaborators	Instructors	Students
Health Justice Speakers Bureau (HJSB)	94 speaking opportunities across 55 speakers	18 faculty instructors	979 registered students
Community Course Alignment (CCA)	28 collaborators in 15 courses	16 faculty instructors	355 registered students
Epidemics of Injustice (EoI)	50 speaking opportunities and action labs across 62 collaborators	2021 and 2022: 2 PhD student instructors 2023: 1 PhD student instructor 2024: 1 community instructor	200 registered students 988 community attendees*

*Does not include data from 2021, where the number of unique community attendees was not tracked.

Centering Guest Speakers Who Share Their Lived Experience

The Health Justice Speakers Bureau (HJSB) is a cohort of community and practice leaders who share their expertise by serving as guest speakers in SPH classrooms (see Figure 1). Past speakers have taught on various topics from environmental racism to housing as a human right. Students often complete preparatory assignments prior to speakerships, like reading about the speaker’s work and preparing questions or comments for the speaker. During class, speakers share the history of

an issue, policies that shape health injustices, and the challenges in attempting to disrupt systems of injustice. These discussions challenge students to deepen their awareness of social, political, and economic systems that foster injustice and consider how those systems impact lived experiences. In this *conscientization*, students strengthen their ability to identify systems of oppression and see them as connected from past to present. While guest instructors spend varying amounts of time on the political and historical context of an issue, critical consciousness raising tended to happen

organically. Given the relatively short time for guest speakers during a class session, it has been a challenge to integrate *generative themes* and *problem-posing*. Both of these principles have typically been integrated through questions posed to the class; however, we recognize that their integration could be better enhanced through more time for *dialogue*. After each speaker, students have assignments or class discussions in which they reflect on what they learned and how they or others could take action. Most speakers have shared their contact information and tangible opportunities for future involvement, including internships, research, and participation in direct action. These opportunities have enabled students to embody *praxis* by creating opportunities to act in solidarity with speakers' organizations.

In order to promote a positive experience for speakers, the CEnT team has spent ample time discussing how to foster a welcoming environment and streamline logistics. The CEF is flexible and responsive to speakers' needs, including assuring speakers felt welcomed at the university and sharing their direct phone number for accessible communication. Also, SPH course instructors ask students to demonstrate engagement with speakers by being on camera during virtual speakerships and by asking and answering questions. We have shared our gratitude to speakers in a number of ways. We began by compensating them \$50 per speakership and have increased this to \$100 to account for preparatory time based on guest speaker feedback. We also provide parking reimbursement as well as handwritten cards and CEnT promotional items. Through participation in HJSB, speakers have sparked mutually beneficial connections and collaborations at UIC and across Chicago, which we consider a preliminary step in building meaningful relationships with ongoing *dialogue*. Given that many of these relationships are still growing, we would say HJSB laid the foundations for *love* to grow through humanizing each other as co-learners and promoting solidarity with communities most impacted by structural injustices.

Collaborating with Community Organizations on Grounded Projects

Community Course Alignment (CCA) matches UIC public health courses with an individual or community organization for semester-long applied projects that contribute to the organization's work (see Figure 1). Orientations to the organization early on in the project help

align student projects with an organization's mission (Rinaldo et al., 2015) so at the beginning of the semester, collaborators provide students with summary documents, website links, and virtual or in-person orientations on a public health topic and their organization. In some cases, students have been invited to visit the organization's office or a community site, which expands students' awareness beyond reading the text and into experiencing the daily work more directly. This grounding also provides students with important historical and political contextualization, an understanding of the organization's role within the public health system, and how the organization seeks to address injustices faced by their communities, thus advancing *critical consciousness*.

Once oriented, the students begin work on their final projects. The project scope is either communicated at the beginning of the semester or is identified and/or refined based on information that emerges through the collaboration. Example projects have included a comprehensive evaluation plan for a youth empowerment and recidivism reduction program, a grant proposal to develop a community-based urban agriculture project, and policy briefs to advance local ordinances around healthy housing and economic justice, among others. Students engage collaborators in *dialogue* to explore *generative themes* and practice *problem-posing* as they examine the main drivers of health issues and how they impact the organization and/or community in particular. While the extent of *dialogue* in each class has depended on all participants' availability and time, collaborators provide ongoing feedback to students through meetings, email, and/or by attending class sessions. This has fostered a continuous cycle of co-learning for participants, where each iteration of the assignment becomes more robust and better aligned with community needs. Through dialogue and ongoing feedback, students engage in *praxis*. By being responsive to collaborator feedback, students deepen their relationships with collaborators. Many students have been invited by collaborators to engage in opportunities such as internships beyond the course.

Ultimately, most participants have committed more time and effort than was originally envisioned in the early stages. However, this level of engagement has enabled students to tailor their projects to the needs of collaborators and, ideally, enhance the utility for the collaborator. The in-depth collaboration has also fostered a growing sense of trust, respect, humanization,

and *love* between participants. For example, some instructors began meeting weekly with collaborators to prepare for class and shared teaching time or incorporated collaborators' insights into course content. The strength of some collaborations has been tested when bureaucratic challenges at SPH acted as barriers to collaboration. For example, collaborators in one class were not permitted entry into the school building for a scheduled class because they could not provide written evidence for needing building access. This experience created an unwelcoming environment for collaborators and required the CEnT team to push for change to university building-access policies to ensure this situation did not re-occur. The advocacy for collaborator needs and policy change to ensure harm was not replicated was a manifestation of *love*. Collaborations that emerge from CCA are typically more time intensive, but the time invested deepens the application of many, if not all, liberatory principles.

Student-Led Course Open to the Public

Epidemics of Injustice (EoI) is a course at UIC SPH created by the student organization Radical Public Health (RPH) (Figure 1). The course launched in 2017 to create a space within the institution where students, academics, and people with lived experiences can co-learn to defy traditional academic pedagogy and public health practices. The course is taught by an instruction team that includes an SPH faculty member, an RPH facilitator, doctoral student(s), and/or an individual outside of SPH who has extensive community organizing experience. Learners have included enrolled students from any UIC discipline and community members, such as non-degree-seeking students and people outside of the university, who can attend for free. Each session is led by a guest(s) with experience countering systems of oppression and/or working on radical solutions related to the weekly topic. The sessions are instructed as lectures or action labs, which are interactive, public health skill-building activities focused on dismantling systems of oppression.

EoI is principally grounded in *conscientization*. The course has a new theme each year based on contemporary public health issues, such as "Health Equity Praxis: Building Possible Worlds Together" and "Understanding History to Fight for a Liberated Future." The first class each year focuses on grounding all learners in the history of public health inequities and structural determinants of health. All subsequent sessions are based on

specific topics connected to the annual theme. The overarching class theme thus acts a *generative theme* for semester-long discussion and reflection on the ways in which the topic impacts peoples' lived experiences. Action labs build concrete skills like writing op-eds, power mapping, building public health campaigns, and participatory budgeting. Students who are especially interested in a weekly topic are invited to pursue additional direct-action opportunities shared by guest speakers as *praxis*.

EoI brings faculty, staff, and students from various universities together to *dialogue* with workers, public health practitioners, advocates, and other community members. Given the large classroom size in past years (typically 150 attendees or more), *dialogue* has been integrated in numerous ways to promote shared learning. Learners use the chat to share resources, ask questions, make connections, and discuss content, and credit-seeking students attend a 30-minute discussion after each class session. Dialogue allows students to reflect on their learning and to embody *praxis* by exploring the relationship between classroom learning, weekly direct actions, and continuous reflection. In addition to group discussion, credit-seeking students have weekly assignments that allow time for individual reflection. For the final culminating project, credit-seeking students select an issue of interest and reframe it in terms of its historical and political drivers as an exercise of radical thinking and *problem-posing*. Examples of final projects include a training module to educate healthcare providers about fatphobia and a social media toolkit to raise awareness about food insecurity.

EoI incorporates *love* by creating an educational environment that centers respect and care for all. The course recognizes all community members' right to learn regardless of ability to pay and thus invites them as co-learners in the classroom. Community members with lived experience and invaluable knowledge are centered in the classroom during compensated speakerships and action labs, and in open course discussions. The instruction team extends love to credit-seeking students through flexibility and understanding. For example, attendance is not been monitored, deadlines are flexible, and grading is based on effort. The instruction team strives to reduce barriers to entry and participation, with more recent efforts including making materials openly accessible through a course Google Site, archiving class recordings on a publicly available YouTube, and ensuring language justice by providing live

Spanish interpretation. These acts of love allow all involved to see each other as more fully human and as beings with dynamic lives.

Lessons Learned and Considerations for Educators

Initial lessons from practicing liberatory pedagogy can be categorized into two themes: 1) the importance of committing time to develop meaningful collaborations and 2) the nature of doing transformative work inside normative institutions. These reflections come from the CEnT team's effort to institutionalize our model from 2021 to 2024. Our forthcoming paper on evaluation details the perspectives of and perceived impact on students, instructors, community partners, and university administrators.

Building Meaningful Partnerships Over Time

At the heart of these collaborations is the importance of relationship-building between collaborators, students, instructors, and the CEnT team. The CEnT faculty lead helped increase participation by inviting her ongoing collaborators as well as leveraging her relationships with SPH instructors to garner participation in the initiative. Without her existing relationships and trust with both collaborators and SPH instructors, we would have likely experienced lower participation. Other universities should not underestimate the importance of involving faculty and others who are known for their ongoing community-engaged work and can galvanize others with their clear vision for liberatory pedagogy. While faculty play a critical role in the success of liberatory pedagogy initiatives, this work can also come at the expense of individual faculty's personal career advancement if a university does not recognize the value of community collaborations or liberatory pedagogy by reflecting it in their promotion criteria (Clark, 2017).

During the recruitment phase for CCA and HJSB, we were challenged to work within the eligibility criteria we developed, particularly with identifying people from community organizations with lived experiences resisting systems of oppression who have had limited speaking engagements in academic settings. While we initially thought our criteria was specific, in practice, there were nuances. For example, there were several interested speakers from under-represented groups within institutions such as government and academia who wanted to share their efforts to transform their institutions. We ultimately welcomed them to

participate in the initiative with the stipulation that they focused on issues of health justice and discuss how they involved additional people with lived experience to transform the systems within which they worked. We found that categorizing people's expertise and lived experience into strict criteria excluded a growing number of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in academic and institutionalized spaces who use their own lived experience to transform those very spaces.

Additionally, we were challenged to ensure CEnT components were mutually beneficial for students, instructors, and community collaborators. An essential component of ensuring benefit for all was clearly communicating expectations and providing proper orientations. We concur with Karasik and Hafner (2022) and Rinaldo et al. (2015) that once partners are recruited, it is essential for instructors to engage with collaborators early on and set clear expectations around the time and effort commitment anticipated and properly orient students to the collaboration. Ideally, a CEF is present to facilitate discussion about critical components like course overview and objectives, speaker or course content, and the principles of liberatory education. These initial conversations helped balance the power dynamics between instructor(s) and collaborator(s) and enhanced the alignment of the collaborator's contributions with other course content (Kanj, 2024). At the same time, the extent to which collaborators could align their content with content already covered in the course varied within and across the components. In general, CCA collaborators spent more time with their classes so they could align their content more closely with other class sessions, whereas HJSB and EoI collaborators were not always as familiar with course content.

Time was another challenge that persisted throughout CEnT but varied by component. For example, CCA instructors and students had more time with collaborators than those in HJSB. With limited time, collaborators—particularly those in HJSB—often chose to use their time in the form of a lecture. This aligns with the default mode of instruction in our current educational system. Unfortunately, both students and instructors noted that lectures led to a lack of engagement between students and speakers, and limited dialogue. Therefore, other principles like critical consciousness building, developing generative themes, and problem-posing also had weaker applications. Time is among the most important components of relationship building, so sufficient

time must be allocated to liberatory pedagogy initiatives. In an academic environment where there is an emphasis on productivity and efficiency, this investment of time from instructors, students, collaborators, and initiative coordinators is essential for relationship and movement building, yet often goes unrecognized by the university (Clark, 2017). It is important to consider how to compensate collaborators for their time with students and to acknowledge that instructors might also seek compensation for the time they spend converting and preparing a course to practice liberatory pedagogy. Finally, given the investment from all involved, it is important to have a concluding commemoration, such as a final presentation or reflection. Partners in particular report that this offers closure to the projects (Rinaldo et al., 2015). We began having celebrations at the end of each semester as a way to continue fostering love and gratitude in our work and for participants to meet each other across projects.

Practicing Transformative Work in Normative Institutions

Attempting transformative work in an institution that systematically maintains the status quo through its policies, practices, and procedures triggered friction and substantive challenges (Howard, 1998). Principally, instructors were challenged to integrate collaborators into existing syllabi that have been designed according to university guidelines and accreditation criteria. Within the Master of Public Health program at our SPH, there is more flexibility in the curriculum of elective courses than required core courses where the class topics are pre-populated and replicated year after year. That said, even in elective courses, instructors in CCA were still beholden to existing syllabi, course objectives, and public health competencies, which ultimately resulted in some foundational misalignment between student project products and collaborators' needs. Alignment is an important determinant for how much collaborators benefit (Rinaldo et al., 2015).

Research academic institutions operate in a revenue-generating system, a neoliberal model that emphasizes the exchange of money for knowledge and standardized curriculum over the importance of broader social transformation (Boyd, 2011). We found that this affected the implementation of CEnT in multiple ways. Liberatory education initiatives were treated as causing problems for administration given the resources they require and their lack of revenue generation. In the case

of EoI, where instructors open their classrooms to the public for free, university administrators only consider credit-seeking students who pay tuition to be actual students. These priorities fail to recognize the transformative learning experience for all and ultimately impact opportunities for collective dialogue, reflection, and praxis by limiting some of the opportunities to credit-seeking students only. Further, community collaborators shared that their previous university speakerships typically did not include equitable compensation or access to university resources. To avoid perpetuating this, our compensation model was adjusted through conversations and feedback during the initial semesters.

Given that liberatory pedagogy requires time, trust-building, and co-learning among participants, it may not be a learning approach that all students have experienced before. In this model, students are invited to be active participants in their own learning which is not as straightforward as the traditional university model where students pay tuition to receive standardized knowledge. Some students may be learning new historical and social concepts and practicing a new mode of education. This can be stressful for students who have learned to be successful in academic institutions that prioritize efficiency, straightforward learning, and textbook-based knowledge (Howard, 1998; Clayton & Ash, 2004). Students must grow to be flexible to syllabi changes and challenge internalized perceptions that grades are the ultimate marker of success.

Notably, liberatory pedagogy does not come without counter-efforts to maintain the status quo. EoI, for example, was conceptualized as a course that would engage students in learning and dialogue about topics not traditionally included in academic courses. Its radical focus continues to generate pushback from the administration and some faculty, who wish for the course to be implemented following dominant pedagogy and institutional norms such as being faculty-led rather than student and community instructor-led. Student organizers have encountered pushback when organizing sessions focused on U.S. imperialism, medical racism, and the genocide in Palestine because they are labeled as "too controversial." Individuals who wish to implement similar efforts must recognize that counter-normative efforts do not come without pushback and it is the persistence through this struggle that embodies true solidarity and meaningful partnership. In the end, the normative nature of the university combined with

the revenue-generating mindset may mean that liberatory pedagogy efforts may not be funded by the universities they seek to transform (Swords & Kiely, 2010). Indeed, we have experienced this firsthand with CEnT, forcing us to consider how this work might look different in the future. At the same time, we know institutional change is possible, as evidenced by the ongoing existence of EoI, a course developed and driven by graduate students that has been institutionalized as a credit-bearing course.

Lastly and importantly, it can be a daunting task for collaborators to share their lived experiences, recalling experiences of trauma and injustice, in order to teach students. This is a tension in liberatory pedagogy whereby the voices of community members are essential to re-imagining how institutions can operate but also asks them to recall past experiences that may be difficult. This calls on instructors to ensure that collaborators are sufficiently compensated and cared for, and to ask questions about how they can shift their approach to center community members' healing in classrooms. The goal of this work is to liberate minds to liberate people, and as such, it is important to consistently center and adjust our practice such that it benefits those who are most impacted by normative societal institutions.

Conclusions and Implications

Academia can be a normative institution that reproduces norms around knowledge and expertise (Fairchild et al, 2010). Without its own transformation, academia functions like any other social institution and risks reproducing social injustices through classroom teaching (Swords & Kiely, 2010). For this reason, educators interested in liberation must re-examine their own teaching practices and university norms that reproduce systemic injustice. The Freirean model of liberatory pedagogy reimagines the relationship between teacher, student, and community members, embodies teaching through lived experience, and opens possibilities for a multi-directional flow of knowledge among participants. Liberatory pedagogy couples community engagement with social justice principles, and trains students to disrupt the root causes of injustice that impact community health. Importantly, the Freirean model envisions the role of education in society as much broader than developing individuals to be successful in the workforce, but as central to the building of a more just society for everyone (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987). As a movement

for establishing liberatory teaching specifically in university settings grows (Ackerman, 2020; Reed, 2023; Swords & Kiely, 2010; Soltis, 2015), we implore faculty to document and archive their lessons for others seeking to do the same. In the United States, where Freire himself said the education system was a tool to reproduce social injustices across race and class (Freire & Macedo, 1987), we need various models for practicing solidarity with community movements. While it may take generations to see the outcomes of our collective labor, we follow other radical scholars' long-term commitment to liberatory pedagogy as both a means and an end: it is a participatory path to re-building society broadly, with the most marginalized people at the center re-imagining how we might do things differently (O'Cadiz, 1998).

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