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Investigating A University Classroom Where The Participants Are Purposely Invited, Included, And Engaged Through Liberating Structures

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INVESTIGATING A UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM WHERE THE PARTICIPANTS ARE
PURPOSELY INVITED, INCLUDED, AND ENGAGED THROUGH
LIBERATING STRUCTURES

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PURPOSELY INVITED, INCLUDED, AND ENGAGED THROUGH
LIBERATING STRUCTURES

by

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THESIS

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate how a classroom that employs Liberating Structures (LS) is perceived and experienced by class participants. *Liberating Structures* (LS) are simple protocols of how people interact while they work and learn together, allowing for inclusion and engagement of all participants at the same time. The research examined how the use of LS practices and processes in a classroom influences participants' sense of inclusion and engagement, their sense of being part of a learning community, and their perceptions of the learning and relational outcomes that accrue. Various methods of data collection and analysis—participant observation and (auto) ethnography, in-depth and focus interviews, and participants' weekly learner notes—were employed. These data were coded openly, and constantly compared for common themes and emerging patterns with respect to what LS make possible in a classroom.

From my analysis of an LS classroom over a semester-long period, it was clear that when an instructor pays purposive attention to the five micro-structural elements—an invitation, use of space, distribution of participation, group configuration, and sequencing and time allocation—the group outcomes are of a higher order and quality. Participants felt included and engaged and part of a cohesive, tolerant, and open learning community. Such feelings manifested through a variety of processes and mechanisms, including from participants' sitting in a circle, learning each other's names, sharing food, hosting visitors, trusting each other, feeling safe in voicing their opinions, taking ownership of their learning, and feeling included and engaged in the conduct of the classroom. Further, the instructor's facilitative attitude, and corresponding actions, were found to be highly conducive to the creation of a vibrant learning community.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my most sincere appreciation to my thesis advisor and committee chair, Dr. Arvind Singhal, who, with his tremendous effort, wisdom, and invaluable ideas steered me along this journey. It was a great honor and privilege to work under his direction. Thank you, Sir, for introducing me and giving me a glimpse into the wonderful world that is LS. Thank you for your continuing support as I take on the challenge of continuing to learn and grow in this area of marvel and wonder.

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I would also like to thank other members of the UTEP LS community, especially Ms. Lauren Perez, for your guidance and support, and for trusting me to stand by your side, my friend. I would also like to publicly thank LS co-founders, Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless—thank you for bringing a long overdue set of communicative practices in the public domain—ones that inspire, include, and change the world one conversation at a time.

I also owe a deep gratitude to my mother, Leticia Garcia. Without her encouragement, support and amazing advice I would not have pursued this endeavor.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“...The world is changed through small, elegant shifts in the protocols of how we meet, plan, conference, and relate to each other. [The Liberating Structures approach] puts in the hands of every leader and every citizen the facilitative power that was once reserved for the trained expert.”

Peter Block (quoted in Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014, back cover).

This research endeavor is as much a professional quest to pursue an intellectual curiosity, as it is a deeply personal journey.

Communication in a Classroom: A Personal Journey

I am usually the quiet student that sits at the back of the classroom. I do not ever raise my hand to offer my opinion or an answer. I like to hide, be in the background—be invisible. The teacher usually never remembers my name and I don’t make friends of classmates. I am happy to come to class, put my head down, take notes, and make the best grade I can. Grades matter! I know there are several students like me who are happy not to be invited, included, or purposely engaged in a classroom. I am ever grateful for the few “talkers” that every class has and quite frankly I am okay being bailed out by their babble.

This all changed when I took a class my senior year—in Spring 2014—working towards my undergraduate degree in communication at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP).

Unbeknownst to me, I was sitting in a different classroom where the professor seemed to structure things differently. For instance, from day one onward, right through the 16 weeks of the semester-long course, we did not sit in the traditional rows and columns configuration, but instead in a circle. The professor was not behind a podium with a clicker in hand, reading over PowerPoint slides, but instead sat with us in a circle and listened deeply as he facilitated the unfolding conversation. In fact, he seemed to be interested in what we knew, how we felt, and how the topics applied to our daily lives.

Our class would often begin with the ringing of Buddhist Ting-sha bells to bring all participants to a certain state of alertness and consciousness. Strange! Instead of rehashing the readings, the professor would often do several quick go-arounds in the circle inviting each one of us to share--in a sentence or two—our “ahas” and insights, our questions and dilemmas—from the assigned readings. We would keep the circle going until there was not much more to add, and then the professor would add a point or two, raise a question or two, or share a reflective story to add a nuance or to emphasize a point. It was okay for ideas to not be neatly tied up in a package and for questions to linger in a reflective space.

Strangely, in this Spring 2014 class, there were no mid-terms or exams. The professor invited us to conduct weekly real-life experiments based on the course topic, reflect on them, and share with other participants what we believed we were learning. Often in class, the professor would ring his Ting-sha bells and invite us “to rise” to our feet, contemplate the answer to a question in silence, and then invite us to share our thoughts with three other people, face-to-face, in rapid rounds of what seemed like “speed dating” (the professor called it Impromptu Networking) (see Figure 1). This seemed to be in stark contrast to a teacher examining us on—a structured pre-coded multiple-choice test—what they believe we needed to learn in the class.



Figure 1. Co-participants engaging in Impromptu Networking.

Even more strangely, when students would routinely comment on the “different” structural elements of the classroom—for instance, how we created a safe space, or how time was used to invite all students to participate, the professor would often turn around and ask, “what difference does the difference make?” For instance, what difference did it make to spatially arrange the chairs in a circle? How did it influence the quality of conversations among the participants? What difference did it make to be standing face-to-face with classmates doing several cycles of rapid sharing in a 3-hour class? What difference did it make when people got equal time (whether they were “hiders” or “talkers”) to share and iterate their ideas? What difference did it make when the answers to the posed question bubbled up from the participants—crowd-sourced and then harvested by the collective?

These embodied experiences of being a participant in this Spring 2014 classroom intrigued me—intellectually and personally. I knew that I had become friends with every single person in the classroom (there were about 20 of us), and an ethic of respect, trust, and care among the participants was palpable. More importantly, I felt invited, included, and involved in the collective learning and relational outcomes that we—the class participants—generated together. In class, we discussed how invitation, inclusion, and involvement were fundamentally communicative concepts, and I remember being thrilled with the realization that the discipline in which I was getting my degree—i.e. communication—made a difference in a real-life learning context. Deep down, I felt that our class was a living “community” and it even had an after-life i.e. connections and conversations among class participants continued after the course ended. It is quite unfortunate that this was the first time that I felt that way about a class. Up until this point in my college career I had taken more than 60 lecture based classes and it wasn’t until my final semester before graduating, that I took I class that changed my perspective in every way.

Liberating Structures in a Classroom

During the Spring 2014 class, and sometimes outside, I began to hear that the professor in question (Arvind Singhal in the Department of Communication at UTEP) was employing the practice of Liberating Structures (LS)— “simple protocols to organize classrooms through different spatial arrangements, group configurations, distribution of participation, and sequencing of steps” (Singhal, 2016, p. 132). I learned that LS-inspired spaces create the conditions for equitable student participation, peer-learning, and building of connections, and that the teacher serves as a facilitator—a partner in discovering solutions (Singhal, 2013, 2016).

In the Fall of 2015, when I joined the MA program in Communication at UTEP, I was exposed regularly to these group interactional practices known as Liberating Structures. I took

another course (*Communicating in Healthy Communities*) with Professor Singhal in Fall, 2015, and became even more curious about what they made possible in a classroom by inviting, including, and engaging everyone. Further, as part of my graduate research assistantship, I worked closely with Dr. Singhal and Dr. Lucía Durá in the Department of English to coordinate activities for UTEP's Social Justice Initiative (SJI). I learned that both Drs. Singhal and Durá were avid practitioners of Liberating Structures at UTEP, and that Dr. Singhal was employing them in his classrooms since 2004, when he (at that time a professor at Ohio University) began to work closely with the two LS co-founders, Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014). I learned that both Henri and Keith have visited the UTEP campus several times, and mentored many UTEP faculty members, graduate assistants, and border-area community members in the practice of LS. Through SJI's many activities in the past 18 months, including trainings and workshops offered locally, I became an active observer, participant, and even a (novice) user of Liberating Structures. Drs. Singhal and Durá invited me to co-facilitate certain meetings using LS as a way of gaining more confidence. In mid-April, 2017, I traveled with them to a three-day workshop on LS at Washington State University in Pullman, WA and co-facilitated a few LS with them and others (see Figure 2). In Pullman, I also happened to meet LS co-founder Keith McCandless, a moment of deep honor for me.

Since that Spring semester of 2014, i.e. over the past three years, I have been intellectually primed to take on a deeper investigation of LS, what they do in classrooms, and what they make possible for individual participants, as also the collective.

Purpose of this Thesis

Appropriately, the purpose of this exploratory investigation, conducted as part of my MA thesis, is to find out how a classroom that employs Liberating Structures is perceived and

experienced by class participants. How it influences their sense of engagement and involvement and their sense of being a community. Also, how it influences their perceptions of the learning and relational outcomes that accrue.



Figure 2: Researcher Sandoval (left standing) co-facilitating a Troika with Dr. Singhal (standing next) and Dr. Durá (standing far right) at Washington State University.

Plan of the Thesis

In the following pages of my thesis proposal, I invite you (in Chapter 2) to gain a deeper understanding of what guides my inquiry into Liberating Structures, and the communicative principles they embody, while reviewing relevant and salient literature in areas of organizational and educational scholarship, including constructivist pedagogies, student-centered learning, and flipped classrooms. I also discuss my methods of data-collection (in Chapter 3)—participant observation, (auto)ethnography, in-depth and focus interviews, and an analysis of learner notes of participants enrolled in an ongoing course that employs LS. In Chapter 4, I present the results of the study, and in Chapter 5 its implications and limitations.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this chapter, I review the relevant literature about group interactional practices known as Liberating Structures (LS), including their emphasis on tweaking microstructural elements (such as physical space, usage of time, distribution of group participation, and others), as also discussing the simple rules and principles that undergird the practice of LS. In so doing, I point to the limitations of traditional group communication methods (such as the presentation, the managed discussion, or open discussion), presenting LS as an alternative or complementary approach to unleash the potential of everyone—in a classroom. While arguing that LS builds trust and generative relationships in a classroom, I also pose the research questions that guide this inquiry.

What are Liberating Structures?

Liberating Structures (LS) are simple protocols of how people interact while they work and learn together, allowing for inclusion and engagement of all participants at the same time (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014). Liberating Structures challenge the prevailing notion that a classroom or a workplace cannot be engaging or enjoyable. In fact, when students and participants are engaged in classrooms and workspaces, learning, productivity and group performance outcomes are significantly higher (Singhal, 2013; 2016).

LS flip upside-down the conventional practices that dominate classrooms and workplace meetings, where usually the teacher or the manager is in-charge—transmitting invariant and standardized information as a “sage on stage,” or directing conversations in ways that leave many participants feeling excluded, unheard, and marginalized. As Singhal (2016) argues, the design of classrooms, boardrooms, and workspaces are deeply rooted in the ideology of the

industrial revolution, emphasizing standardization, uniformity, and regularity. Participants, sitting in rows and columns, should behave in an orderly manner. Students and employees are looked upon as commodities to be processed, trained, programmed, and produced in an invariant manner (Lipmanowicz, Singhal, Wang, & McCandless, 2015). LS question these notions of standardized, uniformity, flowing in one direction.

Traditionally, group interactions in a classroom or boardroom occur in one of these five different ways (Lipmanowicz et al., 2015; Singhal, 2016): (1) a presentation, (2) the managed discussion, (3) the status report, (4) the open discussion, and (5) the brainstorm.

The *presentation* gives most of the control of a conversation to only one person that has been designated to distribute all the information that is to be given. The presenter is usually deemed the expert and does little to include audience participation.

The *managed discussion* also puts only one person in charge and is used when a decision needs to be made. This person directs the conversation and has the responsibility of seeking input from others in order to make an informed decision.

The go-around *status report* is one in which the “microphone” is passed from one person to another (i.e., turn-taking) with the purpose of briefing the boss or the bigger group.

The *open discussion* is one in which no-one in-charge but often in response to a presentation or a non-directed question.

The free-flowing *brainstorming* is usually employed to generate wild ideas through a Ping-Pong style conversation that is too loosely structured that often misses multiple perspectives or informed local know-how. The ones who are most vocal are usually most heard.

The five traditional methods of group communication are highly limited in what they can make possible. They can either be too controlled (like the presentation) or not controlled enough

(like the open discussion). On the other hand, liberating structures use the same people and resources to include and engage everyone.

How do LS Differ from Conventional Practices?

To understand how LS differ from conventional practices, and what LS can make possible in a classroom, let us turn to Lipmanowicz et al. (2015, pp. 238-239):

Anu is a teaching assistant giving a course in public speaking to a group of some 30 undergraduate students.... After all students had their first public speaking experience she wants to do a quick debrief, have the students reflect on what they learned and, looking back, what they would do differently. A standard practice, the one that has been in use for centuries, would be for the teacher to throw the question at the whole class. A few students would raise their hands. She would pick three, four, or perhaps five students to share their thoughts, and then she would share her own observations and recommendations. All other students would be left with no choice but to listen passively. Most students would have likely zoned out.

Anu instead decided to use a Liberating Structure called Impromptu Networking (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/2-impromptu-networking/>). She first asked each student in class to stand up. Then she told them that she wanted them to pair up preferably with someone they didn't know well and that they had 30 seconds each to answer the following question, "Looking back at your first public speaking experience what would you do differently?" She told the students that after the first round she would ring a bell and they would have to pair up with another student for another 30 seconds while addressing the same question. And then there would be a third round. Then she rang her bell and said, "Go, first round!" The whole room erupted in spontaneous combustion. All students were immediately engaged first sharing their idea, and then listening to their partner.

The energy in the room was palpable. Positive body language was everywhere: students leaning in, smiling, and listening. Three times meant three opportunities to reflect more deeply and learn from peers. At the end of the three minutes, while students were still standing up, Anu asked, "Who would like to share something you heard from a partner that you thought was particularly valuable?" She let the sharing go till it ended on its own; all the learning from the whole class was captured effortlessly and quickly within a couple of minutes. Importantly, what Anu did with thirty students could

have been done with 60 or 300 students within the same amount of time. Liberating Structures scale very easily.

This small example illustrates how and why it is possible to be more effective and productive as a group and, at the same time, make it also enjoyable for all participants. It is enjoyable because everybody is actively engaged from start to finish. It feels good because everybody is given equal space to speak and be heard. It is fun because it is dynamic and energizing. It is rewarding because it gives everybody the opportunity to contribute to the whole learning process. It generates lots of interactions between people who otherwise would remain distant despite sitting in the same room. These multiple interactions build connections and, gradually, trust between people thus fostering a sense of community, something to look forward to spending time with. Allowing the entire variety of contributions to emerge from the group enriches the conversations while leveling the playing field. The teacher becomes more of a facilitator, a partner in discovering solutions.

While Impromptu Networking is one of the simpler Liberating Structures, it illustrates the characteristics of the whole set of 33 liberating structures (Figure 3), compiled and systematized by Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless—a senior corporate executive and organizational development practitioner, respectively (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014). In recent years, LS are increasingly finding use in educational and healthcare institutions, as well as corporations and non-profits—getting everybody engaged from start to finish, giving everybody equal space to be heard and contribute, and enabling everybody to practice self-discovery (Singhal, 2016). LS work by tweaking microstructural elements of any group interaction.

Tweaking Microstructures

The “magic” of LS lies in how they tweak the microstructures that govern group interactions. When people get together for a certain purpose, whether in a classroom or a boardroom, there are at least five microstructures that determine what happens in the meeting—how invitations are issued, how time, space, and configurations are used, and how participation

is distributed. LS pay special attention to tweaking these five microstructures (as was evident in the actions of Anu, the teaching assistant) (Lipmanowicz et al., 2015):



Figure 3: Some 33 liberating structures have been codified and systematized. *Source:*

Lipmanowicz and McCandless (2014).

1. The *invitation* – The invitation can be a request or a question to create a common focus.
For group work to happen there must be an invitation. An invitation can be for group work participation, for people to simply listen or to speak up or to contribute to a common focus.
2. How *space* is arranged and what materials are used – The place where group work takes place is as important as the purpose. All the materials, tangible and intangible also play important roles.
3. How *participation* is distributed – This refers simply to how much time a person will have to contribute.
4. How groups are *configured* – The configuration of groups refers to different group sizes and the freedom to change the configuration as needed.
5. The sequence of steps and the *time allocated* to each step – Every type of group meeting contains a sequence of steps and certain amount of time allotted to each step.

By tweaking these five microstructures in different ways to accomplish different ends, Lipmanowicz and McCandless have systematized a set of 33 liberating structures—all governed by some simple rules and principles.

Rules and Principles Governing LS

All 33 LS are based on ten simple rules — evident in the example of Anu, the teaching assistant—which include (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014):

Table 1. Ten Simple Rules Governing the Use of LS

-
1. Simple: Requires only a few minutes to introduce
 2. Expert-less: beginners can succeed after a first experience
 3. Results-focused: likely to generate better-than-expected, innovative results
 4. Rapid cycling: fast iterative rounds are very productive
 5. Innovative: sparks creative relationship with clients or customers
 6. Inclusive: together, everyone is invited to shape next steps
 7. Multi-scale: works for everyday solutions, big projects, strategy, and transforming movements
 8. Seriously fun: boosts freedom and responsibility
 9. Self-spreading: easy to copy without formal training
 10. Adaptable: spreads with fidelity and adapts to local conditions via minimum specifications
-

Source: Adapted from Lipmanowicz and McCandless (2014)

These ten simple rules undergirding LS are derived from a set of 10 deeper principles (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014) that fundamentally honor the wisdom that lies in every single participant. LS believe in the following:

1. **Include and Unleash Everyone:** Everyone that faces a challenge is invited to contribute to finding a solution or a new way to approach the challenge. The important part of this principle is to include everyone, don't just stick with the same people that always participate, go beyond these people and include everyone. This includes everyone from the bottom to the top, the freshmen to the seniors, the company CEO to the entry-level employee.
2. **Practice Respect for People and Local Solutions:** Engage the people doing the work. When attempting to solve a complex challenge, there is no person better to help find a solution than local people or someone who has experienced a challenge first-hand. Outside experts will not have the same expertise as the local experts. In order to respect local solutions and people we must learn to lose the compulsion to control.

3. **Start with a Clear Purpose:** It is important to start with a clear purpose at the start of working. That purpose is different in different situations and settings. There must be a clear set purpose founded by what is important to everyone involved. The purpose must also be clear, not confusing and easy to understand by everyone.
4. **Build Trust as You Go:** Trust must be an essential part of any group. Trust can be earned by valuing input, especially when speaking the truth. Trust can also be earned when there is shared ownership of a common goal. When creating goals or making decisions, use the input from everyone.
5. **Learn by Falling Forward:** Debrief every step. Make it safe to speak up and discover positive variation. Include and unleash everyone and take risks safely.
6. **Practice Self-Discovery Within a Group:** Engage groups to discover solutions on their own. Learning can be increased when solutions are uncovered on your own. Increase diversity to spur creativity, broaden potential solutions and enrich peer-to-peer learning.
7. **Amplify Freedom and Responsibility:** Specify minimum constraints and let go of over control. Use the power of invitation. Value fast experiments over playing it safe and celebrate mistakes as sources of progress.
8. **Emphasize Possibilities:** Focus on what is working well, and what can be accomplished now with the imagination and materials at hand. Take the next steps that lead to creativity and renewal.
9. **Invite Creative Destruction to Enable Innovation:** Convene classroom conversations about what is keeping people from working on the essence of their

work. Remove the barriers and that make it easy for students to deal with fears and ask for help.

10. **Engage in Seriously Playful Curiosity:** Stir things up – with levity, play, and interesting questions—to spark a deep exploration of current practices and latent innovations. Make working together both demanding and inviting.

Having reviewed the rules and principles governing Liberating Structures, it is important to place the practice of LS in a historical and conceptual context.

The Historical and Conceptual Basis of Liberating Structures

In reviewing the literature on LS, it is important to note at the outset that the existence of practices such as Liberating Structures is not widely known. The first book about LS (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014) was recently published. Only a handful of articles that have “liberating structures” in the title are at hand (Lipmanowicz, Singhal, Wang, & McCandless, 2015; Ferguson, Ulmer, Harris, Kavouras, & Richison, 2015; Singhal, 2013; Singhal, 2016). These publications describe in detail the various LS and the rules and principles undergirding them, paying special attention to what LS make possible—whether in a classroom or a boardroom. Explorative investigations of liberating structures in classrooms point to feelings of inclusion and engagement among participants, building of meaningful connections and trust, the fostering of a sense community, and higher order learning outcomes (Ferguson et al, 2015; Singhal, 2016). LS also allow liberation for the lecturer, transforming their role from teacher to a partner and facilitator (Singhal, 2013; Lipmanowicz et al., 2015).

While there is scant literature on the actual practice of LS—a guiding motivation to undertake this thesis project, the conceptual basis of LS (see Lipmanowicz et al., 2015) can be traced back to teachings of the Greek philosopher Socrates over two thousand years ago, and to

20th century educational practitioners and scholars such as Dewey (1938/1987), Bruner (1960, 1973, 1996), Piaget (2001), Freire (1971), and Montessori (1986). Lipmanowicz et al. (2015) notes that these educational giants critiqued the industrial model of public education that privileged one-way transmission of expert knowledge, emphasizing the importance of interactions, dialogue, and collaboration in the learning process (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Davis, 2013; Kolb, 1984). LS pioneers Lipmanowicz and McCandless (2014) argue that these industrial standardized practices stifle inclusion and engagement, leading to disengaged participants, dysfunctional groups, and wasted ideas. Liberating Structures allow participants to recover their voices and agency, and help them believe they have something worth contributing.

Further, organizational, communication, and educational scholars have emphasized the merits of the rules and principles that undergird the practice of Liberating Structures. Organizational scholars have valorized the value of group processes that spur inclusion (Lawler, 1994), spark engagement and curiosity (Spielberger & Starr, 1994) and self-discovery and learning (Harvey, Novicevic, Leonard, & Payne, 2007). Groups achieve better outcomes when participants feel they can contribute (De Dreu & West, 2001) and participate on equal terms (Simon, 1985). Further, participants who were included from the very beginning on a project, are less likely to resist decisions for they feel they were provided an opportunity to voice their opinions (King, Anderson, & West, 1992).

Group work, as is the hallmark of LS, also contributes to the absorptive capacity of the group when everyone participates and contributes (Stasser & Titus, 1987). Absorptive capacity can be defined as “the ability of an organization to recognize the value of new, external information, assimilate it and apply it” (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). When diverse individuals share information on a routine basis, as LS make possible in a classroom or a boardroom, it can

lead to learning new things and seeing things from a different perspective (Edmonson, 1999). Further, the participatory quality undergirding LS produces the social support that is often needed for new ideas to be pursued and implemented (Mumford & Gustafson, 1988).

Educational scholars who write about the constructivist approach to pedagogy, student-centered-learning, and flipped classrooms provide a framework to further explore and investigate the practice of LS in a classroom.

Constructivist pedagogy involves “the creation of classroom environments, activities, and methods that are ground in constructivist theory of learning, with goals that focus on individual students developing deep understandings in the subject matter of interest and habits of mind that aid in future learning” (Richardson, 2003). There are several aspects that underlie constructivist pedagogy, including student-centered learning—which takes into consideration, the peculiarities of the importance of the individual student. In this approach students influence the content, activities, materials, and pace of learning (Collins & O’Brien, 2003). Other characteristics of constructivist pedagogy that align well with LS practices include group work and conversations, involving students in different tasks that allows them the opportunity to self-discover what is useful, and encouraging students to be mindful of the learning methods used, and what they make possible.

LS practices are also consistent with certain aspects of what is construed as a flipped classroom. The flipped classroom transfers the teaching to the student so that they can learn on their own and in groups with the facilitation and help of the teacher as and when needed (Bennett et al, 2013). Flipped classrooms allow students to be actively involved in subject matter discussions, providing student agency and voice, including challenging teachers’ views on issues discussed (Rahman, Abdullah, Mohammed, Zaid, & Aris, 2014).

With the pressures that higher education faces to implement more student-centered teachings, Liberating Structures offer a potential way forward. Studies on constructivist approach to pedagogy, student-centered learning, and flipped classrooms (cited above) have shown that not only do students prefer and enjoy this style of classroom learning, but so do the teachers. Studies show also that such practices can be implemented into various types of classrooms with students that are at various academic levels, and lead to an increase in student agency, student accountability, student responsibility and investment in students' own learning. As a scholar noted: "students are at a point where they can't deconstruct for themselves or piece it together themselves..." (Carhill-Poza & Gounari, 2016).

The growing movement toward embracing the constructivist approach to pedagogy, student-centered learning, and flipped classrooms, coupled with the scant existing literature on LS use in a classroom, helps shape the multi-part research question that guides this study.

Multi-Part Research Question

How is a classroom that employs Liberating Structures perceived and experienced by class participants? How does it influence their sense of engagement and involvement—their sense of being a community? How does it influence their perceptions of the learning and relational outcomes that accrue?

In the next chapter (chapter 3), I describe my methods of data-collection, which include participant observation, (auto)ethnography, in-depth and focus group interviews, and participant insights about LS in their weekly class learner notes.

Chapter 3

Method and Data-Collection

In this chapter, the methods of data-collection to carry out this study are discussed. An official approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board, The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) on January 23, 2017 to carry out this investigation, using informed consent protocols (see Appendix A), and an Interview Guide (see Appendix B).

Research Site and Participants

The site for this research project was a cross-listed undergraduate/graduate communication course (COMM 4350/COMM 5350) titled *Communication and Positive Deviance for Social Change*. The course was taught in Spring 2017 at UTEP by Professor Arvind Singhal and employed LS in ways consistent with my description of my Spring 2014 experience (see Chapter 1; and Singhal, 2013). The course began on January 23, 2017 (the day the IRB approval was secured) and ran for 16 weeks until the week of May 8, 2017.

A total of 29 students were enrolled in this class of which six were undergraduates (all seniors) and 23 were graduate students. Of these, 26 participants signed consent forms and participated in the study. Of the consenting ones, 15 participants were male, and 11 females. Students belonged to various academic disciplines, including communication, interdisciplinary studies, leadership studies, fine arts, and educational studies. I was enrolled in the course as a graduate student of communication, and fully participated in experiencing and observing the LS processes in our classroom over the 16-week duration.

Methods of Data Collection

My methods of data-collection included participant observation and ethnographic exploration, in-depth and focus group interviews with participants, and an analysis of

participants' ongoing, written reflections on their learning from the class. All students were required to keep an ongoing learner journal, called their Learner Notes, documenting the insights that they gleaned from the subject matter of the course, as well as the processes employed in class.

Participant Observation, Ethnography, and Autoethnography. I collected data through participant observation and ethnographic observation, drawing upon certain elements of carrying out an autoethnography. Being enrolled in this course and fully participating in all class activities, including completion of assignments, provided me a natural platform to carry out this simple ethnographic observation. Participating in all class activities allowed for the other class participants to view me—the researcher—as an insider and a peer, as opposed to an outsider and/or a stranger-researcher who visits once (see Figure 4). This natural engagement between the class participants and I allowed for rapport building with other students; more importantly, it allows for unobtrusive participation and observation (Hatch, 2002). Doing an ethnography also allowed me to go further in-depth with what I was capturing. I could have side conversations with other participants, I had to complete every assignment everybody else had to and I was present at every class. By doing this, I could not only experience class as a student participant but I was able witness and record other interactions, conversations and events.

Although there isn't complete agreement on what an autoethnography looks like, essentially it is the viewing of the research enterprise from the perspective of the researcher, and using that point-of-view to tell a story. It brings together a researcher's past experiences and present reflections to be able to better see connections among experience, theory, and explanation (Douglas & Carless, 2013). So, in taking notes of the different interactions that I witnessed between class participants and the professor, I would reflect upon how these were

different (or similar) from my previous class experiences. When I would take notes of how people communicated nonverbally while sitting in a circle—through smiles and nods—I reflected on how different (or similar) it was from sitting conventional classrooms i.e., in rows and columns.



Figure 4. Researcher Sandoval (left) participating in a class activity.

I would also take notes of the different things said in class—things I wouldn't have been able to capture in group or personal interviews. While taking my observation notes, I was careful to keep my opinion out of the data and simply note things that I witnessed and heard. Later, upon looking at my data, and my learner notes, my autoethnographic perspective allowed me the opportunity to take the information in, and expound on it further within the context of my inquiry—i.e., what LS made possible in a classroom?

As I was enrolled in the course, I was present and fully participated in every weekly class meeting (a total of 15) of approximately three hours each, allowing for a total of 45 hours of embodied data collection as both a participant observer and ethnographer. The semester-long

spread of the class provided ample time, both in-class and outside of class, to interact with the study participants for in-depth and focus group interviews (Guest, 2013). The 15-week data-collection spread also provided me the opportunity to witness and experience, a wide variety of classroom processes, including the many different LS that Professor Singhal employed, and the different ways in which he purposely tweaked the LS microstructures of space, time allocation, group configuration, invitation, and the like.

Further, being enrolled in the course gave me the positionality as a researcher to interact with my site and fellow participants in a natural class environment. The method of participant observation allowed me—the researcher—to grasp the tacit rules and norms of the class that are not explicitly stated. Since LS allow for tweaks in micro-structures of space, time, and group configurations, as a participant observer I could pay attention to the “mundane” as well as the “extraordinary” things that occurred in the classroom (Sandiford, 2015).

Interestingly, one of the commonly employed LS is called a **Simple Ethnography** (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/28-simple-ethnography/>). I applied its key components to my research. A simple ethnography makes visible the invisible routines, and helps to reveal tacit and latent knowledge of participants that is usually inaccessible through explicit in-depth interviews or focus groups (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014). A simple ethnography can be especially revealing when anchored by a respectful and trusting relationship between the participant observer (the researcher in this case) and the subjects (or class participants). A participant observer engaged in embodied ethnography is better able to answer the “why?” question. For instance, “why does sitting in a circle make a difference; or why crowdsourcing of ideas from the bottom-up fosters a sense of ownership among the participants?” and so on. This positionality also allowed me to view the unfolding relationships between and among the class

participants, and between the class participants and the professor. Beyond the interplay of evolving relationships, this research provided an opportunity to reflect on, and analyze, the contextual container—a semester-long university classroom—in which actions and activities unfolded (Mack, Woodson, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005).

Participant observation and ethnographies are anchored on detailed note-taking. I took copious notes in class on what was happening, and after every class session, I expanded and typed out my notes. Enclosed, by way of example, are the first drafts of my observation notes from the first and second-class sessions—on January 23 and 30, 2017 (see Appendix C). I continually, constantly, and cumulatively kept elaborating on these notes, making sense of them, and knitting them together as I moved forward.

A deep dive into the ethnographic notes moved the analysis forward, building on past learnings (my autoethnographic frame), and allowing me to connect individual-level insights—of the students—with organization-level insights—of the classroom (Graizbord, Rodriguez-Muniz & Baiocchi, 2016). To make these connections, a constant comparison was carried out with what was already known or being learned, allowing for the widening and deepening of embodied understanding. An effective ethnography recognizes insights from past occurrences, allowing it to be compared to anything new that is observed or experienced (Willis & Trondman, 2002).

In addition to using a **Simple Ethnography**, I also incorporated an LS referred to as **W3—What, So What, and Now What?** (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/9-what-so-what-now-what-w/>) to analyze and report my findings. Chapter 4 essentially reports the results in terms of What I found, whereas Chapter 5, deals with the So What? and Now What? questions i.e. the implications of these results and findings. The W3 LS imposes a certain discipline in moving up/down the ladder of inference, systematically going from reporting facts (What

happened?), to interpretation of what those facts mean (i.e., So What?), to implications for future action (i.e., Now What? To the extent possible, I employed LS sensibilities to make sense of what LS made possible in a classroom.

In our semester-long class, the professor employed a variety of LS in our class sessions, including (1) **Impromptu Networking** (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/2-impromptu-networking/>), (2) **1-2-4-All** (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/1-1-2-4-all/>), (3) **Conversation Café** (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/17-conversation-cafe/>), (4) **Troika Consulting** (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/8-troika-consulting/>), (5) **Celebrity Interview** (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/22-celebrity-interview/>), and (6) **User Experience Fishbowl** (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/18-users-experience-fishbowl/>).

Given we have already discussed how **Impromptu Networking** could be employed in a classroom, I provide examples of how other processes were employed. A **1-2-4-All** allows all participants to be engaged at all times and allows for rapid generation and cycling/sifting of ideas, prior to its sharing with the entire class. This LS was often used in class to debrief a task, or to generate ideas for the next phase of a class project. **The Conversation Café** was employed to help the class participants dig deeper into opportunities and challenges i.e. in sharpening the parameters of group projects. **Troika Consulting** was used by participants to ask for consulting advice on how to overcome roadblocks and challenges in implementing a class project, and to identify solutions and available resources. The **Celebrity Interview** was used when we had guests in class--we had guests in class 10 out of our 15 meetings. Instead of the professor introducing the guest, he would ask them a series of informal and welcoming questions so the class participants could understand who they were, why they were in class, and how they could serve as a resource for class participants beyond the confines of the classroom. **The User**

Experience Fishbowl was employed when, for instance, project groups reported their weekly progress in informally structured “fish bowl” settings. Formally curated panel-type group presentations and the use of PowerPoints were discouraged; rather, group members were encouraged in fishbowls to openly talk about “the good, the bad, and the ugly,” invite questions and feedback from observers, and to do so in a collegial (not competitive) spirit.

In addition, a variety of microstructures (space, time allocation, configurations, and invitation) were continually tweaked and dynamically adapted by the instructor—to establish initial conditions in the classroom, or to shape how the conversations unfolded. For instance, the instructor routinely employed “rapid” **opening and closing circles** to get each individual participant engaged immediately (as in an opening circle), and to share and harvest their take-aways from the class (as in a closing circle). The class, always arranged in a circular configuration, would begin with the instructor ringing the Ting-sha bells some 2-3 times, and when the room was quiet, contemplative, and experiencing a certain collective “consciousness,” each participant was asked to share—in no more than one sentence— “What is on your mind for today’s class?” This invitation provided each participant to openly say their bit, to hear their voice, and the voice of others, and to feel included and engaged right off the bat. Employing a similar process, the class often ended with the participants being asked, again in a rapid, circular format, what they believed “they got out of the class—an aha, a dilemma, a question, an insight?” This simple opening and closing activity, each lasting no more than 3-4 minutes each, represented an invitation for 29 participants to feel welcomed, to help set the class agenda, and to know that each of their individual take-aways (diverse as they were) enriched the collective.

In-depth and Focus-Group Interviews. In-depth interviews with class participants were conducted outside of class sessions (usually prior to, or after, the class session) between March 6,

2017 and May 8, 2017. A total of 12 personal, one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted with class participants post March 6, 2017 depending on their willingness and availability. Interview questions were structured in a way to evoke stories and to capture nuance and richness. Questions were open-ended to allow for extended descriptions of what participants experienced in the class, what it meant to them, especially in terms of inclusion, engagement, their learning. Listening to the answers quietly and patiently—without interrupting—gave participants comfort to elaborate and go into detail (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Further, to gauge how the class participants were doing both individually and as a collective, on March 6, the instructor left the classroom 45 minutes prior to the time class ended, allowing me to ask them—employing two closing circles of about 25 participants each—about their engagement with the class’ LS processes, and their sense of inclusion, participation, and learning. On the last day of class, May 8th, adapted focus group interviews (utilizing LS such as **1-2-4-All** and a variation of **Critical Uncertainties**-- <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/30-critical-uncertainties/>) were conducted with two groups of 6-8 class participants, to gain further cohort-level insights. In-depth and LS-centric focus group interviews allowed the opportunity to gain in-depth understandings of the “what?” and the “why?” and the “how?” (Becker & Greer, 1957). Along with the notes from the participant observation and ethnography, multiple rounds of participant interviews allowed for the capturing of the “fuller” story, including individual and group perceptions of what the participants find to be meaningful, or not, and why.

Participants’ Learner Notes. As part of the assignment matrix, all class participants were required to keep a learner journal of ongoing, weekly, written reflections on their learnings from the class. After each class, participants—at home—were required to write some 500 words on what they believed they learned in class that day. The invitation to write was open-ended:

participants could document the insights that they gleaned from the subject matter, discuss the pedagogical interactional processes employed in class, or to express the interconnections between their personal and professional lives and the classroom experience. Some eight participants shared their whole or partial learner journals with me so I could gauge their real-time engagement with the course content, including their perceptions of how the classroom processes influenced their learning. In the autoethnographic spirit, I also drew upon my reflections and learner notes from the 15-week class. To illustrate the richness that these participant learner notes hold for this study, in Appendix D, I enclose learner notes (with permission) of two class participants. A quick glance of the learner notes provides insights on how LS processes change the nature of the classroom environment, invite inclusion and participation, and influenced learning outcomes.

Data-Analysis

All the data generated from participant observation, ethnography, autoethnography, in-depth and focus interviews, and participant learner notes were transcribed and are available in textual form. These multiple data transcripts and notes, running into over 100 single-spaced pages, were analyzed for major and minor themes to answer the research questions that are posed. The data was analyzed for emerging patterns using the Grounded Theory approach. Grounded Theory is a research method that enables the development of an exploratory theory that explains what is being studied—in this case, what LS make possible in a classroom setting over a semester-long duration. Simply, it is the discovery of emerging patterns in the multiple forms of data that are being collected (Glaser, 2015).

In this approach, data was openly coded as it was being collected. Open coding is searching for patterns in every piece of data collected—participant and ethnographic

observations, in-depth and focus group interviews, and participants' learner notes. These various forms of data were analyzed and compared for common themes. These different sources of information were analyzed to look for points and incidence of corroboration. A corroboration of the data speaks to the notion of validity and robustness toward theory building (Charmaz, 2006). After the data was openly coded, connections between the datasets and the insights they hold, were cumulated and compared (Oktay, 2012). While coding the various sources of data, a constant comparison of each data source was conducted.

Constant comparisons were done by coding the information and analyzing it at the same time. The constant comparison process unfolded in different stages. First, the collected data was separated into different categories. I followed a manual sorting process, using scissors to cut different strips of textual data, and separating them in piles and sub-piles (Figure 5). These were compared constantly and were stacked up into categories and sub-categories.

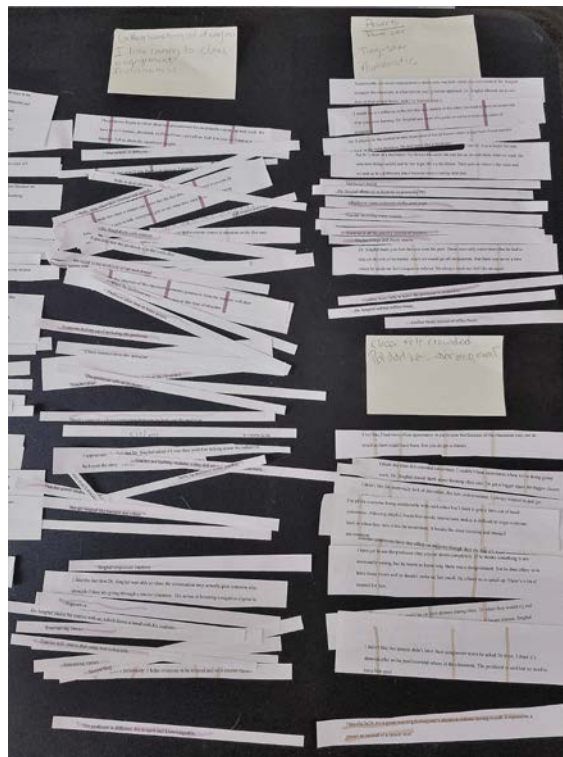


Figure 5: Strips of Data in Thematic and Categorical Piles.

The categories were then, organized and placed on poster boards to have a visual of the findings together (Figure 6).

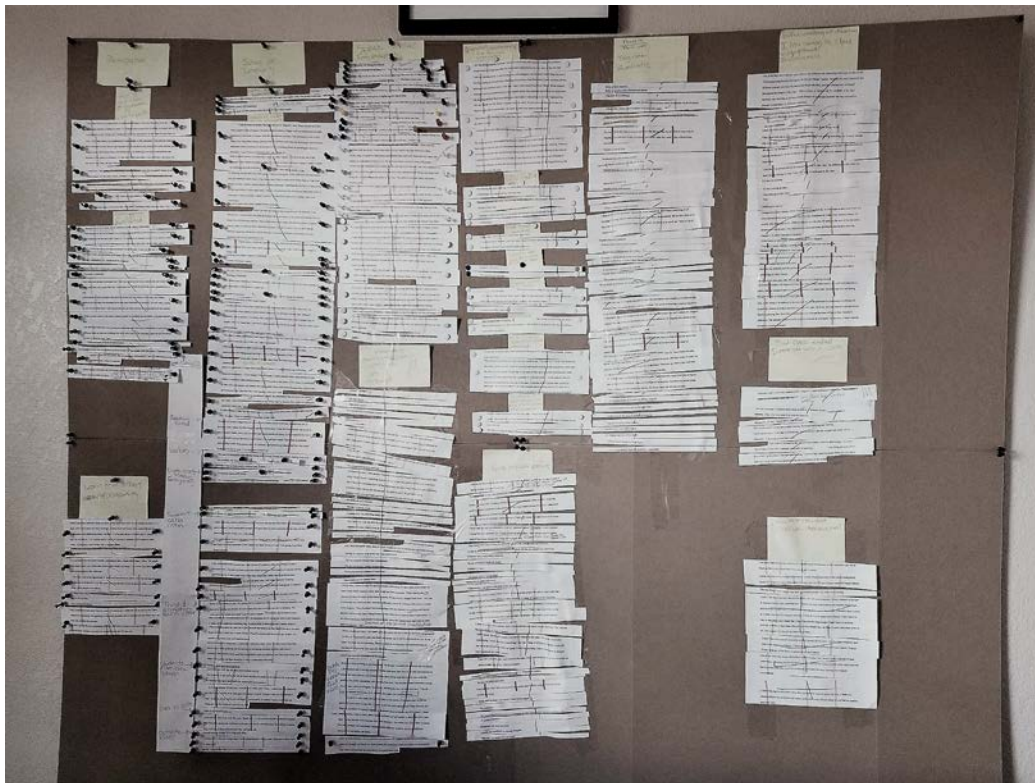


Figure 6: Finalized Thematic Categorization on a Poster Board.

The categories were further organized into emerging themes, through a constant comparison method, allowing for explanations and a theory to emerge from the ground-up.

In the next chapter, I report the findings from this analysis.

Chapter 4

Results

In this chapter, I present the results of my study, answering the multi-part research that was posed previously: *How is a classroom that employs Liberating Structures perceived and experienced by class participants? How does it influence their sense of engagement and involvement—their sense of being a community? How does it influence their perceptions of the learning and relational outcomes that accrue?*

As noted in the previous chapter, all the transcribed data—generated from participant observation and ethnography, in-depth and focus interviews, and participant learner notes—were coded openly, and constantly compared for common themes and emerging patterns, looking for points and incidence of corroboration.

Several different themes and categories emerged from the data which are reported in the chapter. An eyeballing of all the data, as also a deeper dive into it, showed that the class participants repeatedly alluded to the presence of, and influence of, the five microstructural elements that characterize Liberating Structures (LS)— (1) invitation, (2) use of space, (3) distribution of participation, (4) group configuration, and (5) sequencing and time allocation. So, I first report emerging themes and categories from the data, centered around the five-microstructural elements of LS.

After that, I report on the most dominant theme—the creation and manifestation of a learning community—that emerged as being salient from our constant comparison of data sources. This dominant theme was marked and elaborated by a variety of sub-themes with respect to what LS make possible in a classroom: (1) learning of each other's names, (2) everyone knowing everybody, (3) breaking bread together, (4) welcoming visitors together, (5)

mutual support and trust among participants, (6) instructor's facilitative attitude and actions, (7) safety in voicing of one's opinions, (8) ownership of learning, and (9) a richer, deeper, inclusive engagement with the class.

The Presence Five Micro-Structural Elements of Liberating Structures

1. Invitation

Overwhelmingly, the participants felt that this classroom provided them with many opportunities to participate. The professor issued various invitations—at multiple times during each class session—to shape the class discussion, providing each participant an opportunity to engage. For instance, at the beginning and end of each class session, there invariably was an opening and closing circle. In the closing circle, participants were asked to express a single word, or a phrase, or a sentence to reflect on that day's session, the group work, readings, or insights and take-aways. These structured yet open-ended invitations allowed “each participant to bring in their opinions,” while providing an idea of “where other students stood with their class learning.” Interestingly, many participants got into the mode of issuing invitations to their fellow classmates. Participants noted that the instructor made it “very clear from the very beginning” that “an invitation meant that all participants could accept and say, ‘thank you,’ or even, a ‘no, thank you.’” The ‘no, thank you,’ however, rarely happened.

2. Use of Space

A major theme that arose again and again in the in-depth personal and group interviews, as also in the participants' learner notes, was the way space was used, and chairs were arranged. “The desks are arranged different,” noted one student. One participant in a group interview said, “There is no front of the class.” If there isn't a front of the class, one may ask—where does the professor stand to lecture? Where does the PowerPoint slide appear? The professor sat in a circle

with the students. He never used PowerPoint to transmit a one-way lecture; instead, he facilitated a conversation, issuing invitations, and allowing students to draw upon their readings and life experiences, to facilitate a self-discovery of the key course concepts.

Because the chairs were arranged in a circle, one heard repeatedly: “The class feels more open.” Another participant noted: “There were higher quality interactions” with “a lot of eye contact.” Further, the instructor, encouraged us—from the first day of class—to sit next to someone that we didn’t know very well; and as the semester progressed and people would get comfortable sitting next to someone, he would simply invite people to move next to a person they did not know well. One member of class said, “We aren’t allowed to have assigned seating. It was good that everyone would feel comfortable just sitting in different places. One participant said it best: “Compared to other university classes, where we usually sit in the same desk, situated in the same area of the classroom, next to the same people, for an entire semester, this experience was totally different.”

Sitting in a circle, one member of class mentioned “It feels like you’re in a hot seat, but not in a bad way.” It made people feel “uncomfortable and comfortable” both at the same time. One participant noted: “You can’t hide when you sit in a circle and others can’t hide from you. Everyone sees you and we all face each other.” Another class participant noted: “When somebody was talking, I could always see who was talking.” We can see each other’s facial expressions and their behaviors, including the professor’s. One participant noted in a personal interview: “the professor never showed his back to us. I could look at everybody in class and everybody could look at me. I never felt shut off from the rest of the class.”

One participant mentioned that the use of open circular seating provided her with more confidence in interacting with other people: “At first you feel intimidated by so many people

looking at you but now I am very confident. It has given me a lot of strength in terms of people skills and communication. Being seen helps with being shy. It contributes to the safety of the class. The structure provides safety and helps students grow.” Being in the circular seating configuration, and the frequent changing of space when implementing an LS, gave even the shy ones more confidence to speak in front of others. Another class member mentioned: “The way he (Dr. Singhal) structured the class and since we all met each other the first day of class, it made it easier to speak in front of everyone.” This confidence, some noted, they could “carry to other classes, work life, and other aspects of their personal life.”

The open-space, circular seating arrangement created the conditions for more participant engagement. It allowed for higher quality and more personal interactions: “When you say things to another, face-to-face, not only is it easier to feel more engaged, it also kept us all accountable to each other.” In the process, participants noted that they became “better listeners,” and listening to others “contributes to one’s own learning.” As a class participant, I, personally, felt a greater sense of accountability to prepare for class, and to make a more meaningful, value-added contribution when it was my turn to speak. Another participant emphasized how the spatial structures used in class created a more reflective, deliberative atmosphere: “It gave me and others more breathing room to process what was going on in the open discussion.”

The circle, as compared to the traditional rows and columns configuration, I felt is a “better way to use the space of the classroom.” The large open space in the center of a circle, relative to the filled space of closely packed rows and columns, made it easier to configure space for group work, distributed presentations, and represented an invitation to “fill the space with our words, thoughts, and discussion.” The vast openness—that starts-off empty at the beginning of class—is filled over time with insights, thoughts, ideas, and laughter. Like many of my class

participants, I felt that “The seemingly very small idea of how the desks are arranged contributes to the creation of a community—a family atmosphere, a safe space to speak our minds, and to make possible the generation of insightful discussions.”

However, the circular spatial configuration also evoked some critical responses. Some participants—a small minority—felt that sometimes some participants took advantage of the open circle seating by sitting next to their friends, and carrying out private personal conversations. For some participants, sometimes, the size of the classroom, the circle, felt too big (With the instructor and guests the room could swell to 30+ participants). They felt that a “circle would work even better if the class size was smaller.” The circle also contributed to an awkwardness among some participants for when they gave their presentations, or reported from a group of 4 to all the class-participants (as one does in a 1-2-4-All LS), no matter where they stood, they always had their back to at least some people. Another participant noted that because of the size of the class, and the space constraints, sometimes the circle “was tight” and felt it was an invasion of their “personal space.”

3. Distribution of Participation

Given LS processes distribute participation evenly, inviting all participants at once, it was not surprising that every single person in class felt that they had “more of an opportunity to participate in Professor Singhal’s class,” compared to other university classes they have previously taken.

One class member noted: “Participation in class is well distributed.... we get comments from all around the circle. It is well distributed and balanced for the most part.” I personally observed that we would go around the circle, or use an LS like Impromptu Networking or 1-2-4-All, with an invitation from the professor to reflect about a story he told to illustrate a concept,

the readings that were assigned, or a task we were working on. Going around in a circle, for instance, provided each participant an equal opportunity: “Everyone was given the opportunity to participate, and it was fair the way it worked.” Said another: “I feel like in this class everyone participates. Everyone is involved.”

In a personal interview, a class participant eloquently emphasized how participation was equally distributed and fair: “Participation in our classroom has become democratic and open to everyone. We welcomed individuals who were clamoring to contribute, but at the same time we were all included. We see what’s going on and we see who hasn’t participated and the professor would often ask that person for their inputs.” Over the semester-long course, my observations suggested that it wasn’t the same people who were constantly contributing, or the same people that were always quiet and not contributing. Everyone participated equally. Everyone was involved. This became increasingly routine as the semester progressed.

Going around the circle, or when reporting one group at a time (after carrying out an LS, for instance, like 1-2-4-All), some participants, including me, felt nervous as often, the professor would ask participants to randomly invite the next person/group to share. The person/group whom the professor invited first, or who volunteered to go first, could pick (rather, invite) the next person/group. Interestingly, this introduced a dimension of “playfulness”—for sometimes you wanted to go next, so that you wouldn’t go last, and sometimes you wanted to go last. No matter where the sharing started, we knew at some point we had to contribute something of added value. So, as soon as an invitation was issued by the professor, we would begin to collect our thoughts to come up with something that wasn’t already said, and would add value to the comments made previously.

4. Group Configuration

There was variation in how our class was configured depending on the task-at-hand. Sometimes, Professor Singhal would hold fort, and each of us listened—lecture style. Sometimes, we would work in small groups, especially in taking our projects forward, iteratively, one step at a time. Sometimes, we worked all at once in a circle; sometimes we worked in pairs (for instance, in Impromptu Networking), or in fours (in Conversation Cafés). It really depended on what LS or class configuration was employed, and it seems Professor Singhal improvised in the moment.

No matter what the configuration was, I felt that there was a lot of reflecting and listening occurring all the time. Listening to others meant that one learned from one's peers. As one respondent noted: "I think because everyone else participates more in this class I have more of an opportunity to listen and learn from my peers." When class processes create the conditions to listen to others, sometimes the insights are transformational: "I feel I am breaking the barriers that I create by my prejudgments and my instinct to challenge other opinions. I'm learning about my biases and my judgments and my prejudices. I'm learning there's value in everyone's opinions. If I'm open to other's ideas, it gives me a much richer idea to subject matter." This comment glimpses into this student's past and personality. This was the most surprising finding. Liberating structures, for this student, helped to shape his views not only in the classroom, but into his life. These ideas can be echoed into his future. Here, is when I discovered that LS can affect others on a more personal level, as it has me.

This listening dimension of Professor Singhal's classroom was, I realize, a function of us—the class participants—working in different configurations—by ourselves, in pairs, in groups, and as a circular whole. Lots of ideas could emerge in parallel in smaller configurations,

and be sifted and refined in iterative cycles, rising in a safe manner for group-level sense-making.

How listening to others can significantly enhance one's own learning is reflected aptly in this comment: "I felt I could listen and learn from my peers. It's taken a while for the various nuances of the positive deviance (PD) approach to sink in, but in witnessing the processing and digesting occurring in other students, I have listened more attentively to process the PD concepts." I observed that when we worked on our PD term-projects, many of us, including our group struggled through understanding the PD steps, or how to operationalize it for the problem we were trying to solve. However, when we witnessed the processes that other students were going through, it helped us process the concepts for the problems we were trying to tackle. Everyone is going through something different with their own projects, so by active listening, made possible in various group configurations, we gained a richer, deeper understanding of the entire PD process.

5. Sequencing and Time Allocation

The allocation of tasks, and how they were sequenced, were very different in this class compared to other university classes. Often when going around in a circle, Professor Singhal would clearly say that "each person gets a sentence to share their perspective, and let that sentence build on, deepen, widen, or reinforce what has been said before." Also, when LS like Impromptu Networking, 1-2-4-All, Fish Bowls, or Conversation Cafés were implemented, there was clear guidance provided on the time to be spent on each step, and how tasks were to be distributed.

In addition, it was amply clear to me and many of my course participants, that our assignments and grading system were also very different from the prevailing norm. The biggest

graded assignments/tasks included the PD term-project, a couple of 120-second Power (not PowerPoint) Presentations, and ongoing weekly Learner Notes (LNs), where each week we wrote about 500 words on “what we had learned” from the previous week’s readings, class discussions, and our experiences outside of class. There were no mid-terms and final exams—exercises where, essentially, the instructor examines students in what they believe the student should know. Instead, in our class, the burden of sharing what we were learning was on us. Often the class would begin with an invitation for people to rapidly share their weekly learnings with others in a few rounds of Impromptu Networking, or for 4-5 students to openly share with the entire class, who purposely were invited to simply listen i.e. deeply listen to what was learned by another colleague.

Dr. Singhal also emphasized that it would be okay if we did not want to take notes. Many times, he said, “if it does not stick, it probably is not that important.” Instead, he wanted the class participants to be “fully present, mindful, engaged in deep listening, and to only accomplish in class together, what they could not do outside of class.” For instance, one could reflect on what was “sticky enough” in class and include that in a learner note, perhaps making a connection with insights gathered from a reading. Many participants responded to this positively and noted that it was different than other classes and was “less stressful and more enjoyable to complete assignments.”

The LNs that we did at home, after class, became in some ways our learner reflections, with all accountability, responsibility, and pride that goes with authorship. As some noted: “doing LNs is like keeping a learning diary.” Instead of notes taken from a PowerPoint or a lecture, they were notes of what we learned, comprising our own thoughts and perspectives. For many, these LNs became much more than notes from class, evolving into more meaningful

personal sentiments, and/or learning outcomes. As a student noted: “We were also routinely invited to share from our learner notes.... most people recollected what we discussed in class.... and some expanded on concepts bringing their own meanings and feelings.” This led to diverse interpretations—nuanced and subtle—on the same story or the same reading, and this enriched the class conversations immensely.

In terms of deviating from the normative tasks, we were also discouraged from creating and presenting using the ubiquitous PowerPoint. Instead of PowerPoint presentations, we did 120-second Power Presentations. The Power part was clarified early—Powerful, hard-hitting, impactful. The 120-second time allocation was emphasized to “make every second count, and to be prepared in advance.” To make our presentations powerful, class participants had the option of creating props to go with our presentation, but most importantly the professor encouraged us to, “just tell us the high points in a powerful, engaging, insightful way.” The directions for group presentation were clarified upfront. Tasks for presenting had to be divided among the group members. No group had one spokesperson, and each presentation was timed meticulously, often signaled by the gentle chiming of the Ting-sha bells (which the Professor brought to every single class). Further, each of the in-class presentations were scored by peers, and this distributed allocation of peer-reviewed tasks allowed each person/group to receive several feedback notes in real time—usually, at the end of class. Thus, each student was tasked to score others, and be scored, in turn. In so doing, we had to not only provide the person/group presenting with a number from 1 to 100 but we had to write a few sentences on what was said (substance) and how it was being said (style/presentation). I personally felt that being scored by peers relieved a lot of pressure, enriched the pool of feedback, and allowed us the opportunity to “own” both the assignment, as well as the grade that was derived. The individual peer feedback notes were

collated and sent across to the instructor, who then provided an overall grade with a cover statement.

The Creation, Maintenance, Sustenance, and Celebration of a Learning Community

From my personal observations, my embedded and embodied ethnographic stance, and in my employing of the constant comparison method on the various data-sources, what emerged—clearly and overwhelmingly—was that this class, because of its incorporation of various liberating structures, and its tweaking of the five microstructures (discussed earlier in this chapter), represented a *manifestation of a learning community*. Class participants emphasized the manifestation of an ethic of care, a concern for the other—the person, their ideas, what they brought to the table.

Reflecting on the first day of class, one participant noted in his learner notes: “I loved the energy in the room. I already feel a sense of community and it’s only about 2 hours into this class.” Another participant mentioned that previous classes felt like “me versus them, or me against the rest of the class, but here you can rely on others. There is a sense of community in this class.” In many other ways, participants noted that the sense of community in this class is “better than many other classes...it is enlightening and refreshing.”

How did this notion of the community manifest itself? Again, several major and minor themes emerged in our analysis of what made possible the creation, maintenance, growth, and sustenance of a learning community: (1) learning of each other’s names, (2) everyone knowing everybody, (3) breaking bread together, (4) welcoming visitors together, (5) mutual support and trust among participants, (6) instructor’s facilitative attitude and actions, (7) safety in voicing of one’s own opinions, (8) ownership of learning, and (9) a richer, deeper, inclusive engagement with the class.

1. Learning of Each Other's Names.

Each participant in this study reported experiencing a deep sense of community—from the first day of class, to the last, and beyond. On the very first day of class we did an activity to learn everyone's names. We had the opportunity to say our name, something about ourselves, and then our task was to invite somebody we did not know, to introduce themselves next. Prior to the self-introduction, the student had to first recall the names of all the students who had previously introduced themselves, and they were urged to not hurry—to take their time in internalizing the name of each person. If one could not recall the name of a participant, they were encouraged to say “Sorry, I do not recall your name, could you say it one more time?” Or, they could seek help from another class participant who may have remembered. This meant that as new names were learned, the names of previously-introduced participants were cumulatively repeated, and this repetition allowed the students and the instructor to, in about 45 minutes or so, master all the names. Once that was done, several people were invited to go around and demonstrate they had learned all the names, leading to more repetition, more laughter, more applause, and greater bonding.

Learning each other's name and something small about them, right on the first day, and encouraging vulnerability (e.g. “sorry, I do not recall your name.”) and cooperation (e.g. “could someone help me with this name?”), proved to be vital in creating an ongoing sense of community among the participants. From the first day, each person's identity was established—by name—and they were now individuals, fellow human beings, and friends—no longer strangers. Many participants repeatedly noted that in most other university classes, students sit through an entire semester and at the end, at best, pick up a few names—perhaps only of those with whom they work on group projects. Many noted that when you know someone's name, and

that name rings out repeatedly in class (by the instructor or a fellow class participant), it becomes easier to relate to the person, invite them, befriend them, and develop an ethic of care toward them.

One student was struck by how much detail and attention was paid—especially in the first class session—to the simple task of name-learning: “I find it encouraging, ironic, and both odd and normal that we spent most of the time [in the first class] learning about each of us, rather than on the subject matter.” Another noted: “It was apparent that most participants experienced a real sense of community from this introductory exercise. Taking adequate time to establish each person as an individual—with valid and important truths, experiences, and perspectives—represents a building block for meaningful discovery across a semester.”

From the very first day of class, I observed friendships starting to form, and the rippling impact of such connections. As a participant noted: “We started early in building friendships in this class, and as a result I was more likely to strike up conversations with my peers both inside and outside of the classroom. In other classes, I could not.” Two other participants said the following about friendship bonds, emphasizing the qualitative and quantitative aspects: “better bonds are being formed” (higher quality) and “students are bonding more” (higher quantity). These connections were evident in the way students greeted each other in class. When someone walked into class, I observed, other people would say hello. Several students commented on this aspect of community-building: “students greet each other regularly” or “when you walk into the classroom, everyone says hi.” From my auto-ethnographic stance, I can say that walking into a room full of college students, both graduate and undergraduate, is usually intimidating; however, walking into this class was the opposite. Most students noted that they “looked forward to coming to class,” as it was a congenial, collegial, and a comfortable space.

2. Everyone Knowing Everybody.

Rapidly, within two or three class sessions, it felt as if everybody in class knew everybody else. I noticed that even the “shy” ones were connecting with others—a slow but sure blossoming of their personas. As one participant emphasized: “This class is a we environment.” She added: “We is used because this is not a single person class but a cohesive group.” Several participants noted the norms of reciprocity that began to emerge: “I felt I could turn to my peers with questions, while listening to see if my peers had any questions.” I routinely observed that students asked each other about assignments, the readings, or even stuff unrelated to class. The class turned into a mutual support system: “You could always turn to your peers. I always felt my peers were going to listen, perhaps build on it, or perhaps question it. However, I knew I was going to be affirmed and supported by everyone.”

It was also apparent, that class participants displayed a high degree of comfort with each other. As a participant noted: “I feel comfortable with everyone.... such is not the case in a traditional class. I feel we know each other more because of how much we interact and the opportunities we’ve had to learn about, and from, each other.” This comfort and knowing each other led to other small miracles. As another participant emphasized: “We all help each other. When someone is saying something and gets stuck, someone else picks up the conversation, or encourages them to keep going.” Instead of just the professor encouraging the students, the students visibly and palpably picked up the slack for each other. I felt that, personally, I strived to give my best in this class, because in a room full of friends, one’s desire to excel is sharpened.

3. Breaking Bread Together.

Another aspect that, I believe, contributed to the sense of community was that food was regularly shared in the classroom. One participant mentioned: “The teacher always brings and

shares snacks,” which is different from other university classes. Each class day, there would be small items to be consumed—mixed nuts, trail-mix, or cookies. At first it was initiated by the professor, and then as time went on, more participants brought in food and began to share. “Breaking bread” with each other, and that too for a class that met from 6 to 9 p.m., also strengthened the idea of a community. During the last two class sessions, the class participants shared full meals together. On the last day of class, interspersed by our final project presentations, we had a potluck in class, and the table overflowed with homemade enchiladas, chips and salsas, different kinds of salads, and several desserts, including a cake that a participants’ mother made for Dr. Singhal to take home (Figure 7). When food is shared, and that too in a classroom, and over a period of 15-weeks, it becomes, I felt, like a sort of weekly communion.



Figure 7. Dr. Singhal Holding a Cake in the Final Class Session Potluck.

4. Welcoming Visitors Together.

Not only did we share food, but the professor encouraged visitors in class: “Feel free to invite your significant others to class,” he would often say. He himself brought in 7-8 guests (including 3 speakers) during the semester, and students brought their girlfriends, spouses, daughters, sons, parents, in-laws, and friends to our class. Each guest was welcomed, recognized, and encouraged to participate in ways that they felt comfortable (Figure 8), and at least two guests returned more than once. Often, in other university classes, the only guests that are ever in class are the ones the professor has invited as a guest speaker. Several participants noticed that this was quite different than other classes they have taken. One participant mentioned that this contributed “to the creation of a community—a feeling of family.”



Figure 8: Dr. Singhal Conducting a Celebrity Interview with a Guest. The Class Participants in a Circle Listen in.

5. Mutual Support and Trust among Participants.

Once everyone knew everyone, and we were breaking bread together, and welcoming each other's family and friends, it was only natural that the class participants were providing support for each other—with oodles of trust. Any observer of this class, would note that “In this class, everybody matters.” Everyone's perspective and opinions were valued and respected. People's personalities were accepted as they were. As one participant noted: “There's a lot of trust in class. In a class, we always tend to single out people with different personalities, but in this class, we never did it in a way to make fun of them. It was ok in this class to be serious and not take ourselves too seriously. We understood and accepted each other's quirks and accepted them as one of us.” We felt we could be who we are. In other classes, I feel students must play the role of a student, and that doesn't always allow for our personalities to come to the fore. There is so much that is masked or hidden. Being authentic helped breed both vulnerability and trust.

Another way trust was built in class was through deep listening. The professor was always patient even when someone rambled on, and even then, would find a way to interject respectfully, and often point to a “nugget” amidst the ramble. He wasn't the only one listening. From my vantage point as an observer and notetaker, students were also listening and paying attention to their peers. As a participant emphasized: “The time we took to listen to each other was about taking the time to give someone a voice...and as we explored a topic and realized that it was bizarre, we still could find a deeper purpose, and then when something turned up, we were all glad we took the time to do that.” Every speech act was reciprocated with a listening act, and each in turn fueled the other.

6. Instructor's Facilitative Attitude and Actions.

It was quite clear to me, observing our class for over 16 weeks, that professor Singhal played an important role in the creation of a community in class. From the way, he would manage class—with a light touch, to the way he talked to students—using humor and banter, to the way he would use self-deprecation, there exists a deep admiration and respect for our professor.

To begin and end class, and at various times in-between, he would ding his Ting-sha bells. He said, “When you hear the bell ding, drop your attention from what you are doing presently.” He would then invite the class participants to pick up their attention for something else, whether to signal a new round for a Liberating Structure like Impromptu Networking or 1-2-4-All, or for another transition. Several class participants were fascinated by the long-vibrating soothing chime of these Buddhist meditation bells, and felt it brought the class together—as a community—to a certain state of focus and/or consciousness. One student said: “Ting-sha bells are a great way to get everyone’s attention without having to yell, or to ask people to shut up. It represents a ‘power to’ transition, instead of a ‘power over’ a person.” There was a similar comment by another student, “We hear the bells and everyone comes to attention the very first time. This is different in other classes where teachers have to yell a few times.” For the teacher to not yell, to not be hurried, contributed to the deep sense of respect that was held for him.

The professor received numerous compliments from each participant. To begin, the thing most often mentioned about the professor was how much they respected him but they still felt like an equal with him: “For me, I think this class is unique and I also like the fact that we are completely level with Dr. Singhal, everyone gets to talk, everybody gets to say what they want to say without being ridiculed.” From my observations, I felt that students felt a connection with

him. This is because Dr. Singhal treats his students as equals. He treats us with respect and seems to value what we say. He doesn't tower over us behind a podium, clicker in hand. Rather, he sits with us. Another participant in a group interview said, "Teacher does not take the place at the front of the class"—the place where most professors stand and lecture. This, one student noted, leads to "a closer connection between students and the professor" (See Figure 9).



Figure 9. A 120-Second Fun Power Presentation by a Class Participant Honors Dr. Singhal (extreme right) Who Holds a "Singhal Squad" Cut-Out.

My ethnographic observations suggested that professor Singhal respected us by knowing our names, and greeted us by our names when he saw us: "This Professor knows the names of all students." He took the time to get to know students and treated us like adults: "We are treated like humans not robots." He was open and he wanted to hear our thoughts, opinions and ideas. As one student noted: "I have yet to see the professor shut anyone down completely. If he thinks something is not right, he genuinely wants to know why there is a disagreement. But he does

allow us to have those views and he doesn't make us feel small. He creates the space for us speak up which helps to empower students." Another participant noted: "There's a lot of respect for him." He doesn't act like he's better than us, smarter than us or more experienced. We feel confident around him. He supports us. We also feel like we can disagree with him. We know if we have a counter idea or agreement, he'll still listen and won't make us feel small. The entire class holds a deep respect and admiration for our professor.

The deep respect we have for our professor also stems from his self-disclosure, as noted by one student in their Learner Notes: "I find the fact that Dr. Singhal was able to share the information [about his clinical depression] may actually give someone else strength if they are going through a similar situation. His action is breaking a negative stigma to a real illness."

It was also expressed that the professor had clear expectations for us and the way he managed his classroom was quite different than other professors: "Traditionally, classroom management follows a one-way power-authority path. Dr. Singhal managed the classroom in a humanistic way. Dr. Singhal allowed me to see how to treat people better. And I've learned from it." He only took on the teacher role when he had to, and mostly allowed us to take control of our own learning. During one of the early group interviews one student expressed, "I would say it's different in the fact that as a student in this class you kind of have an ownership over your own learning. Dr. Singhal acts more of a guide so we have more of a sense of ownership." Another student echoed a similar sentiment: "Dr. Singhal allows for the student to take more control but he knows when to step back, pause, and reorient us back in the right direction. He acts more like a facilitator." And still another student in a personal interview noted: "I see Dr. Singhal as a leader for sure, but he's more of a facilitator. He throws the cards out and lets us do with them what we want. He sees how things unfold and he lets it go. He's a facilitator. Then he asks us

questions, and we realize we ended up in a different place, and he always says—what’s wrong with that?”

Lastly, it was expressed by several students their feelings about the professor’s coffice hours, instead of office hours. He always holds them right before class, usually at a Campus Starbucks, so that he can buy us a cup of coffee (with cookies, sometimes), and serve that with the conversation. This semester, there was a group of students between 4-6 that would consistently show up for his coffice hours. There were a few students that went only once and a few that went a couple of times. His coffice hours, as mentioned by one student, “Coffice hours tell us that the professor is accessible.”

7. Safety in Voicing One’s Own Opinions.

Another important aspect that contributed to a sense of community in this classroom was that participants felt they could voice their own opinions, be themselves in an environment of safety, and feel that their opinions mattered. As several participants noted: The “camaraderie in this class allowed me to voice my own opinions.” Another noted: “In this class I feel like I’m taken seriously and my opinion matters.... in other classes, the professor doesn’t want me to ask questions or is very condescending if you don’t understand anything.” Two other students felt the same way: “I feel safe in this class to voice my opinions and give my contributions,” and “it was ok to air out our differences in opinions. Nobody felt like they needed to hold themselves back.” Throughout the 15-week long semester, I felt that our classroom became a safe place for us to be ourselves, be authentic, and feel valued for our contributions.

When a safe place is created, I noticed that people tended to participate more. As a participant noted: “I feel like I can absolutely participate in this class. I don’t feel embarrassed or worried people are going to make fun of me. I feel comfortable.”

One participant emphasized: “We shared details about ourselves and were okay being vulnerable because we felt supported by our peers and leader.” There was a deeply personal feeling attached to many responses. Another participant noted that Dr. Singhal’s presence and classroom facilitation “creates an atmosphere where one can fully express oneself.” In the long run, when we could speak our minds without fear of judgement, it led to deeper conversations and connections.

8. Ownership of Learning

Participants mentioned that they learned more in this class than in other classes, and that they could apply what they learned in the real world. Due to the nature and variety of assignments we were given, one participant mentioned that “they would want to devote their time to doing good solid work, not rush, and not engage in hurried learning.” Participants’ felt they learned more in this class on account of the activities that the professor had us do, including the implementation of several different Liberating Structures: “I felt that throughout the semester I got a lot out of each class session because the professor would create activities that promoted self-discovery.” I felt the various LS’ and tweaking of microstructures allowed us to be able to sift through our own ideas, and form our own opinions in conversation with others. Further, taking the time to dissect stories that the instructor shared with the class participants provided a solid understanding of the material. This process allowed participants, I observed, to learn concepts in a richer, deeper manner. This was especially evident in the rising din (volume level) of the classroom when students were participating in an LS. There would be multiple conversations happening at once—with salient ideas bubbling up to the top through a crowdsourcing process.

Several participants emphasized that the things they were learning in class were applicable to the real world outside of class: “My learning has been amazing.... One can learn and apply it to life and your relationships.” Another said: “My own learning was far better than what is average for me. Here you can apply what you learned outside of class.”

There was also a sense of self-motivation that seemed to be operating for some participants. As one said: “I’ve learned more because I feel like I don’t want to let him [the Professor] down because I feel like I have a friendship with him. I care what he thinks about me.” This attitude to “rise to expectations” helped some participants to strive to do more, and to do it better. Being able to move at our own pace in class was helpful. Often in class, Dr. Singhal would ask us: “What do you want to do today?” He would often begin class by saying we will take a few minutes to seek ideas from the participants about what they were most interested in pursuing in that class. That simple invitation led us to believe that we were leading the class, and had some power and control over our own learning. Many students mentioned that they learned more because they could express their interests. One said: “I never know what I might learn.” Although the professor had a broad-based agenda for the class, we felt we had a say in what we did in class. A student noted: “our class is open to different topics” and we “actively make choices of what we want to learn.” Another student put it somewhat differently: “We reinvent the class daily.”

One of the things that contributed to our learning in this class was Dr. Singhal’s storytelling. From my vantage point it was clear that Dr. Singhal likes to tell stories to convey a point and to any observer it would be apparent that his stories were engaging, educational, and had a deeper purpose. It was not uncommon to see that he had everyone on the edge of their seats, paying attention and waiting to hear what happened next. It very rarely happened that he

would stray from his storytelling approach, but when he did, it was still interesting. Several participants mentioned that they learned through his stories. Another student mentioned, “I have found myself telling the stories I hear to others such as my family and students. I do my best to do justice to the story by telling it as accurately as possible.”

As is common with most LS processes, distributed group work was in plenty in our classroom. From the beginning, because of the sense of community that was fostered, and the way the classroom was set up, it was easier to get into groups. There wasn’t an awkwardness in trying to find individuals to form a group. We already knew each other, understood the things that were important to the other, and that helped in carrying out distributed group work. One student echoed this sentiment based on distributed group work for the final PD project: “As a group, we helped each other to understand the various PD steps and determine solutions. It was a great experience.”

Lastly, based on my observations across 16-weeks of class, it could be concluded that participants felt that they “learned more in this type of classroom environment. There’s structure but it’s also at your leisure.” One student emphasized in a personal interview: “If all my classes were structured like this class, I would definitely excel more.” This answer was in response to the question that asked this student to compare this class to every other class he had taken at the university level. He felt like he excelled more in this type of classroom setting. Perhaps if all his classes were structured this way, we could say that he would have endless opportunities to excel in life.

9. A Richer, Deeper, Inclusive Engagement with the Class.

One recurring theme in the creation and sustenance of a learning community was how much the students enjoyed coming to class. Many different participants mentioned that they

greatly enjoyed attending class. For some, it was like “Monday-evening therapy.” One participant mentioned: “Our class never felt like it dragged on. I always felt that I was getting something out of every minute and hour.” In a first entry of their Learner Notes, a class participant joyously wrote: “The students in the class realized how small changes in action can translate into big and positive changes in outcomes.” Attending class was clearly therapeutic for many; and for some represented a refuge, a spiritual healing. A student noted: “The difference with this class is I don’t dread coming to class. I actively want to participate in class.”

Another oft-repeated sentiment for this class was how our class met for the entire class time—all 2 hours and 50 minutes.” Although three hours is not a short time, it passed easily and often quickly. One participant emphasized that “we used every minute of this class. This class is rich and although I felt like we had down time, I felt every minute was a learning experience.” In a personal interview, one class participant noted: “Time was never a big issue in this class.... there wasn’t a strict structure.... Time just sort of flowed but it worked.” Another said, “I think the time is used wisely and fully.” Strangely, quite often the whole class felt like “down time”—the discussions for the most part felt like having informal, casual conversations with friends. If we for some reason ended up overstaying in class by some minutes, few would notice.

There were several words and phrases that the student participants used to describe their course experience, and the most commonly used word was “fun.” Other words and phrases that characterized the class included “enthusiastic,” “energy,” “inviting,” and “making a difference.” There were several students that said they “like coming to class” and that the “class was inviting.”

The syllabus for the course did not dictate what we were going to be doing in-class, rather, it laid out the readings and cases to be read in advance of the class meeting, and then we

collectively shaped the in-class agenda to go wider and deeper into the topic. While it seemed free-flowing, and mostly working with our interests and sensibilities, it didn't feel disorganized. We understood that Dr. Singhal probably had some agenda to help us get through the salient issues, but it didn't feel that we had to stick to a pre-ordained schedule. As one participant noted: "Dr. Singhal may seem to not be too structured, but he makes every minute count. Most other professors just try to cram a lot in, or to kill time. At the end of the day, when he brings it all together, it is impressive. It made class more engaging."

Participants pointed to several experiential aspects that made their engagement with the class richer and deeper. Several participants noted that often the engagement began even before the class began. Sometimes, Dr. Singhal, would send out e-mail teasers a few hours before class, or bring in a surprise guest. As one participant noted: "I'm always interested in what's going to be said in class, and that makes me want to be here." Not only did participants feel engaged, they felt included as well. As one participant noted: "I feel that the students and the professor of this class promote a level of inclusiveness that is unparalleled relative to other classes." Several students echoed the same sentiment and used similar words: "I feel more included than any other class I've taken at the university level."

One of the things that the professor discouraged was the use of technology in the classroom—such as laptops, tablets, and cellphones. The students were invited to be fully present—in body, mind, heart, and spirit—without distractions. While cellphones are usually a major distraction in classrooms and as nobody in this class was encouraged to have technology, everyone could be equally engaged in class. Sitting in a circle meant that there was no place to hide with technology. Everyone was in the plain view of others.

From my vantage point as a participant observer, notetaker, and ethnographer, it was abundantly clear that the last day of class was going to be difficult for most participants—a good thing coming to an end. We celebrated the last day with a potluck, by bringing family members and friends, and seeing the results of our semester long PD projects (Figure 10). One student, saddened by the ending of class, noted: “Going to class is therapeutic for me. I never had such a class. I will miss it.” Another student expressed: “I’m so sad this class has ended. That’s the first time I’ve ever felt that way.” In response to this statement, a previous student of Dr. Singhal said: “Every single class Arvind teaches feels that way.” In one of the final entries of their Learner Notes another student made the following entry: “I enjoyed the class, I had had a difficult day, and when we met I suddenly felt the weight was lifted off my shoulders. I’m going to miss this class!”



Figure 10: The Final Class Session with Class Participants and Family Members.

In Conclusion

From my open coding of the various data sources—participant observation and (auto) ethnography, in-depth and focus interviews, and participant learner notes, several different themes and categories emerged to answer the guiding research question: how is a classroom that employs LS perceived and experienced by class participants? How does it influence their sense of engagement and involvement—their sense of being a community? How does it influence their perceptions of the learning and relational outcomes that accrue?

My analysis suggested that participants repeatedly highlighted the presence of, and the impact and influence of, the professor's tweaking of the five microstructural elements of LS in the classroom (1) invitation, (2) use of space, (3) distribution of participation, (4) group configuration, and (5) sequencing and time allocation. Further, the various data sources pointed to a dominant reading of what LS made possible in a classroom: *the creation, maintenance, sustenance, and celebration of a vibrant, inclusive, and cohesive learning community*. Such was concretely made possible through an interplay of various intersecting and cross-cutting thematic actions, including (1) learning of each other's names, (2) everyone knowing everybody, (3) breaking bread together, (4) welcoming visitors together, (5) mutual support and trust among participants, (6) instructor's facilitative attitude and actions, (7) safety in voicing of one's opinions, (8) ownership of learning, and (9) a richer, deeper, inclusive engagement with the class.

In the next—final—chapter, I discuss what implications my findings hold for the creation of more inclusive and engaging learning environments, and transforming the quality of outcomes when groups of people come together for a common purpose.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

The purpose of my thesis was to investigate how a classroom that employed Liberating Structures (LS) is perceived and experienced by class participants. Liberating Structures, while systematized and codified into a set of several dozen processes, draw their inspiration from the science of complexity and group learning approaches, and speak to prevailing practices consistent with the constructivist approach to pedagogy, student-centered-learning, as also some elements of a flipped classroom. My specific purpose was to discover how the use of LS practices and processes in a classroom, influences participants' sense of inclusion and engagement, their sense of being part of a learning community, and their perceptions of the learning and relational outcomes that accrue.

This qualitative study, one of the first systematic study of LS processes employed in a semester-long classroom, employed various methods of data collection and analysis—participant observation and (auto) ethnography, in-depth and focus interviews, and participants' weekly learner notes. These various types of textual data, transcribed and analyzed, were coded openly, and constantly compared for common themes and emerging patterns with respect to what LS make possible in a classroom.

From my analysis of an LS classroom over a semester-long period, it was abundantly clear that when an instructor pays purposive attention to the five micro-structural elements— (1) an invitation, (2) use of space, (3) distribution of participation, (4) group configuration, and (5) sequencing and time allocation—the group outcomes in terms of learning, performance, and relationships are of a higher quality. Moreover, participants, overwhelmingly, feel included and engaged—that they are part of a cohesive, tolerant, and open learning community. Such

feelings—i.e., being part of a larger classroom community—manifest through a variety of processes and mechanisms, including—as my analysis suggests—from participants’ sitting in a circle, learning each other’s names in the very first class session, sharing food and snacks with each other, hosting visitors, supporting and trusting each other, feeling safe in voicing their opinions, taking ownership of their learning, and feeling included and engaged in the conduct of the classroom. My analysis also suggested that the instructor’s facilitative attitudes, and the corresponding actions that go with them, are highly conducive to the creation of a vibrant learning community.

My Analysis from the Prism of LS Principles

How did my analysis fare from the prism of the 10 LS principles that were outlined in Chapter 2? Table 2 speaks to how Dr. Singhal’s classroom, as evidenced by my analysis, stacked up to the 10 LS principles (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014). From the rich and deep narratives presented in the last chapter, one can surmise that a classroom conducted with LS sensibilities delivered higher order and higher quality learning and relational outcomes.

Perhaps one contribution of this thesis is to propose the addition of an 11th principle to the Lipmanowicz and McCandless list of 10: *The creation of a cohesive and respectful learning community*. The mechanisms to create these “community” conditions could vary from situation to situation, facilitator to facilitator, and topic to topic. For instance, in my study, learning people’s names early, breaking bread together, hosting and welcoming visitors, etc. seemed to play a key role in the fostering of this community—over a semester long duration.

Table 2. LS Principles and Dr. Singhal's Classroom

LS Principle	Manifestation
1. Include and Unleash Everyone	Everyone single person in class participated, every single day.
2. Practice Respect for People and Local Solutions	Professor encouraged students to work with others and to bring their ingenuity to accomplish tasks.
3. Start with a Clear Purpose	At the start of each class, professor would explain the purpose of the class, and invite the students to co-create an agenda.
4. Build Trust as You Go	Students felt comfortable being vulnerable with the whole group, building a trusting and supportive environment.
5. Learn by Falling Forward	After a task was carried out in class, the professor would help us to debrief what happened, and what it meant. There was always encouragement to flip negative statements into positive ones.
6. Practice Self-Discovery Within a Group	We learned from each other by working in groups, and the focus was on learning by “acting one’s way into a new way of thinking,” i.e. through self-discovery.
7. Amplify Freedom and Responsibility	No note-taking, no PowerPoints, but an emphasis on presence, mindfulness, participation, and creativity.
8. Emphasize Possibilities	Professor would always ask “what does this mean for you, for others, in life, in work,” emphasizing the possibilities of application and inspiration.
9. Invite Creative Destruction to Enable Innovations	We had regular conversations to uncover what worked best for us, and what did not, and if so, why, and what needed to be done next.
10. Engage in Seriously Playful Curiosity	The LS we engage in, the stories the professor told, and the humor and banter that undergirded our conversations, made the class fun, engaging, and inclusive, i.e. seriously playful.

While many positive outcomes accrued from implementing LS in a semester-long course, there were some criticisms and limitations reflected in the gamut of comments. The main thing that participants didn't like about the class was the "size of the class." Due to the number of people in class (N=29), one participant emphasized: "Although I had an opportunity to participate, because of the large class size, not as much as there could have been." Another participant noted: "The class was crowded sometimes. I couldn't hear sometimes when we're doing group work." Some participants mentioned that because of the size of class, sometimes there were some side conversations, accompanied by mischief and playfulness that would happen. Often the instructor would then pause, pay attention to the side-bar banter, until the "erring" participants realized they were in his gaze, and they would self-correct themselves. When it would get loud in class (LS can be loud as multiple conversations are unleashed at once), it can disrupt deep listening. However, on balance, the alternative of having an instructor-centered and instructor-delivered class with little participation, engagement, interactivity, or inclusion would have been worse. In this particular class, the participants wanted to be in class, many looking forward to Monday night—a sort of a learning communion (see figure 8). Not many college-level classes, in our university or in others, evoke labels such as "healing" and "heartwarming."

Limitations

This present research has several limitations. I only observed one professor's class, one who was proficient in employing LS, and one who pioneered the use of LS in UTEP classrooms. While this study is valuable, it does not allow us to make generalized formulations about what LS can (or cannot) do in classrooms—for instance, the creation of a cohesive, learning community. To gather more revealing data, other professors that purposely employ LS in the

classroom should be observed. Teaching styles and personalities could have a possible effect on how students learn. However, perhaps, irrespective of teaching styles and personalities, by inviting, including, and engaging everyone, and tweaking of the five microstructural elements in a learning space, one creates the conditions for different outcomes—learning and relational—to accrue.

Further, the subjects and protagonists of this study included only one group of participants—those who were exposed to LS. There was no comparative, control group—those who did not receive the LS intervention, to make claims about the learning and relational differences across groups. Further, the class under investigation falls into a liberal arts/humanistic framework. How might LS apply to more technical subjects—mathematics, science, and others?

Another limitation was that there was only one set of (at one time) in-depth, personal interviews conducted with participants. Perhaps multiple sets of interviews—at different times during the semester—would have allowed the capturing of shifts of opinions, and also allow participants the opportunity to more fully expand, and expound, on their thoughts and ideas.

Future Research

This study only begins to scratch the surface of the possibilities that Liberating Structures can bring to any classroom, boardroom, or work space. The purpose of this study was to investigate in-depth, employing qualitative data methods and ground-up data analysis, what LS make possible in a semester long course. Future research on Liberating Structures must include a wider variety of LS classrooms, taught by different LS practitioners, on a wide variety of subjects (scientific and humanistic), and allow for making comparisons across treatment and control groups—that is, those who receive a certain LS intervention, and those who do not.

Implications

What implications does this study hold for educational institutions and educators, organizations and employees, and for groups at large that are united in some common purpose?

This study, although limited to observation and data-collection in one university level classroom, and that too with a skilled LS facilitator (Dr. Singhal), points to the tremendous potential that LS processes hold for more inclusive and engaged classrooms, better learning outcomes, and higher graduation rates. LS, in principle, are relatively easy to learn and implement, and it is their repeated practice—over a time—that adds depth, width, and range for an LS facilitator.

Dr. Singhal is only one of the many LS facilitators we have on campus at UTEP, and these numbers are expanding as more and more people find out about them, especially what they can make possible. There is clearly more that universities can do to train people in implementing LS, for once hooked to LS, it is quite difficult (as I can vouch from personal experience) to return to the traditional rows-and-columns classroom. In fact, Dr. Singhal, and several of us who are part of UTEP's Social Justice Initiative, will be facilitating a half-day LS workshop in the last week of August, 2017 for all new university faculty and teaching assistants. Dr. Singhal and LS co-founder, Henri Lipmanowicz, had facilitated a similar LS workshop for 150 UTEP faculty and graduate students in 2011. The LS movement is catching on in various other universities (e.g. Washington State University; University of Arkansas' Clinton School of Public Service; Tulane University, and others), mostly through attendees of LS training workshops, former students of Dr. Singhal and others, and other LS enthusiasts.

LS enthusiasts are also growing in numbers in corporations and non-profit organizations, and continually new LS are being initiated, tested, and deployed. There is now even an App (for

I-Phones and Androids) titled “Liberating Structures” that presents a user-friendly pathway to matching a specific LS to accomplish a specific purpose—whether sharing, brainstorming, strategizing, asking for help, or other.

Liberating structures, through their simple design and clearly outlined steps, allow for more effective and healthy communication to occur in classrooms and boardrooms. These processes can transform the performance of any group—students, employees, or clients—immediately and effectively, and to do so while including, engaging, and inviting everyone—at once.

What LS can make possible in a classroom, based on what I discovered, is nothing short of miraculous. My data was replete with positive statements, grateful reflections, and feelings of being part of something bigger than oneself—a cohesive community. I noticed that in our class, people said “thank you” a lot of times— “thank you for allowing me to share,” “thank you for inviting me to go next,” and “thank you for supporting me.”

Thank you, my fellow class participants and my committee members, for this ride.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form for Research Involving Human Subjects

University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Institutional Review Board

Protocol Title: Investigating a Classroom where the Participants are Purposely Invited, Included, and Engaged Through Liberating Structures

Principal Investigator: Vanessa Sandoval

UTEP: Communication

You are being asked to take part voluntarily in the research project described below. Please take your time deciding and feel free to discuss it with your friends and family. Before agreeing to take part in this research study, it is important that you read the consent form that describes the study. Please ask the study researcher or the study staff to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

You have been asked to take part in a research study that will explore your experiences in a Liberating Structures classroom. Roughly 30 students are enrolled in this class at UTEP. You are being asked to be in the study because you have enrolled in Comm 4350/5350 *Communication and Positive Deviance*. If you decide to participate in this study your involvement will last the entire length of the Spring course.

If you agree to take part in this study, the researcher will ask you to take part in approximately 3 different interviews throughout the semester. Questions will be geared towards your experiences participating in a Liberating Structures style classroom. The researcher will also be observing and taking notes while you are in class. These activities will take place inside the classroom during class.

Please note that your participation in this research study will not affect your course standing or grade. There are no direct costs to you. There are no known risks associated with this research. There will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in this study. This research may help us to understand the effectiveness of implementing Liberating Structures into the classroom.

You have the option not to take part in this study. There will be no penalties involved if you choose not to take part in this study. You will not be compensated for taking part of this research study.

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you do not take part in the study, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit.

If you choose to take part, you have the right to skip any questions or stop at any time. However, we encourage you to talk to the researcher so that they know why you are leaving the study. If there are any new findings during the study that may affect whether you want to continue to take part, you will be told about them. The researcher may decide to stop your participation without your permission, if he or she thinks that being in the study may cause you harm.

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Vanessa Sandoval at vsandova@miners.utep.edu.

If you have questions or concerns about your participation as a research subject, please contact the UTEP Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (915-747-7693) or irb.orsp@utep.edu.

Your part in this study is confidential. None of the information will identify you by name. All records will be kept safe. Electronic files will be kept on a single, encrypted, password protected laptop. All other files will be kept in a locked filing cabinet located in office 302b in Cotton Memorial Building.

Authorization

I have read each page of this paper about the study. I know that being in this study is voluntary and I choose to be in this study. I know I can stop being in this study without penalty. I will get a copy of this consent form now and can get information on results of the study later if I wish.

Participant Name: _____ Date: _____

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Consent form explained/witnessed by:

Printed Name: Vanessa Sandoval

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B

In-Depth Interview Guide

1. What are some words or phrases that come to your mind when you think of the group processes employed in Comm 4350/5350?
2. How does this course compare to the other university courses you have taken in terms of feeling included, engaged, and involved in your own learning? What was different? What difference did the difference make?
3. Specifically, did you feel you had more opportunity to participate in this classroom and contribute more than you normally do (explain)? Did you feel you had more opportunity to listen and learn from your peers (explain)? Did you feel that you were in a safe environment to voice your opinions (explain)? Did you feel you were more likely to turn to your peer students for help, discussion, and /or cooperation (explain)?
4. How did this classroom community feel different than most other classrooms (explain)? Specifically, in terms of:
 - (a) How time was used in class,
 - (b) How space was structured,
 - (c) How tasks were allocated,
 - (d) How participation was distributed?
5. How did this classroom feel different with respect to a sense of community i.e. trust among participants, degree of comfort with others, appreciation of diverse points-of-view (explain)?
6. Did you see any differences in the way the instructor managed the classroom interactions (explain)?
7. What did you not like about the way the classroom interactions were structured? How could they have been made better?
8. Overall, how to do you rate your learning from this classroom environment?

Appendix C

Sample Observation Notes from Class Sessions

(after receiving IRB permission)

Class Learner Notes #1

Data Collector: Vanessa Sandoval
Date: 1/23/17
Notes #: 1

Site: Old Main Building, Classroom #201
Start: 6:00 pm End: 8:50 pm
Word Count: 1183

One this date was the very first class of the course *Communicating Positive Deviance for Social Change*. Present at this class were 27 students and 1 professor. There was a diverse group of students from different backgrounds. There were athletes, full time students, full time employees. There was also a mix of grade levels, undergraduates and graduate students. At the start of class, the professor walked in and took a seat at a desk like every other student there. As he sat and talked to those around him, it was clear to see that the other students were all seated next to somebody they knew because of all the talking that was taking place. The desks were configured in the typical style of rows and columns facing the 'front' of the classroom that contained the screen, computer and podium. Some students sat quietly, not knowing anybody else. Those students that knew the professor greeted him and those that did not know he was the professor had confused looks on their face and didn't know whether he was the professor or not.

Once he established himself as the professor, we engaged in an activity to learn everyone's name. The student sitting at the first desk of the first row started and introduced herself by stating her name and major. Immediately when she was done the student sitting directly behind her (with instruction from no one) followed her lead by stating her name and major. As the third student seated next, finished the same exact pattern, the professor decided to change the pattern. He explained that he was going to break this same pattern that if he allowed to go on, would have gone from student to student taking the template the first student used to state her name and her major. Every student after her would have stated their name and major and it would have gone on for each student, row by row. He then asked the students to introduce themselves and when they were done they had to invite another student, one of whom they did not know. When he mentioned this, the air in the room was filled with nervous excitement and a gentle hum of voices expressing that excitement. One of thing things we had to do when it was our turn was say the name of each person that went before us. The entire activity of this name game took a little bit more than an hour to complete. Since there was not a template of blank spaces to fill in, each student took the liberty to state their name and either mention something else or simply go on and invite someone new. Students shared different types of information such as an activity or group they are involved with on campus, their grade level or major. It was very interesting to hear what each student would talk about. By having to invite someone we didn't know to go next, we had to talk to someone new. The game was a lot of fun and seemed as if it only took a few minutes to complete.

When it was one student's turn, he was struggling with trying to remember a previous student's name. Another student, took the liberty of trying to help him and was whispering the correct name to him. When the professor saw this, he said that we should not try and help when someone is struggling. Why should we assume that they need help? If we need help then we can ask for it or ask the person, whose name we forgot, for help to remember.

Throughout the game each student was eager to go next yet it continued without any time limits or pressure to move on quickly. Every so often during the game, the entire class would break into laughter. Everyone seemed to be having fun and was also paying attention to what everyone else was saying so that they could memorize names.

The next thing we did was gather in one big circle, in our desks and we took up a lot of space in the classroom. The professor took a seat at the 'back' of the classroom, but still included himself in the circle. He spoke to all of us from his seat. Everyone stayed relatively in the same place they were seated before the circle. There was plenty of discussion that happened on a few different topics. The professor was sure to speak to every single student and have them contribute to the discussion.

One of the questions that the professor put up for discussion was 'What's different?' Specifically, what was different about how this class has been and what were their experiences so far. Some of the responses include:

"There is a high level of enthusiasm and energy in this class. Everyone is respectful."

"The professor interacted as a student first."

"We are sitting in a circle."

"The professor is talking and interacting with everyone."

"The professor is made a concerted effort to learn everyone's names."

"The focal point of the class is on everyone, not the professor."

There was then a discussion on why these things were different and how we knew what a 'normal' classroom looks like. It was concluded that this looked like a very abnormal classroom. It was discussed that we know what a normal classroom is supposed to look like because of scripts that have been written and past experiences. We know that there are supposed to be rows of students, the professor standing up at the front of the classroom, desks, a chalkboard, posters, exit signs, a clock. It was mentioned that the professor was seated at the back of the classroom because the podium and chalkboard were on the opposite side of where he was sitting.

The next question that the professor put up for discussion was "What difference does the difference make?" Specifically, what is important about the differences that were mentioned. Some of the responses included:

“Makes it more comfortable to be a part of a group, which is important to me.”

“I feel more valued by you inviting everyone.”

“I should have done this with my class.” – as stated by a student who is a teaching assistant

“I don’t feel anonymous – rows and columns helps me tune out – I feel involved in every moment”

“It takes no effort to be enjoyable”

Another student tried to compare this class to what Coach Floyd calls the “One agenda.” Coach Tim Floyd is the head basketball coach for the UTEP men’s team. He tried to quickly explain that there should only be one agenda that a group of people are on, the class accomplishes this by sitting in a circle. He also mentioned that in this class, “We’re all professors.”

We concluded the class by going over the syllabus and future assignments. The professor answered questions about the assignments and assigned half a book to be read by the next class, which will be in exactly one week. So, will also begin the assignment of Weekly Learner Notes. A 500-word essay due almost every week, which details what we learned in class and from the readings.

Class Learner Notes #2

Data Collector: Vanessa Sandoval
Date: 1/30/2017
Notes #: 2

Site: Old Main Building, Classroom #201
Start: 6:00 pm End: 8:50 pm
Word Count: 1093

When I walk into class, the desks are already in a circle formation. There is open space in the middle. I find a seat next to a friend I’ve known from previous classes. I put my backpack down and pull out my notebook and pen, I make sure my water bottle is handy, put my phone on silent and throw it in my bag. The professor walks in and finds his seat. Just as I am settled he announces that we must sit next to somebody that we don’t know. My friend and I look at each other and begin packing up again to find a different seat. She leaves so I stay where I am.

Class begins with the ringing of the Ting-sha bells. When the sounds vibrate through the class, chattering stops and heads start to focus on where the sound is coming from. Students stop writing, reading, playing on their cell phones and get ready to start class. On this day, at the start of this class, there was a student who had been reading, you can see from the not-so-thick number of pages, he was still at the beginning of the book. The syllabus read that we should have read at least half of the book by this class. The professor asks this student how his reading is going. The student replies he has only gotten around 13 pages into the book. The professor then turns to the rest of the class and asks, who has him beat? Who has read more than 13 pages?

Several other students raise their hands. Then the professor asks if there is anyone this student has got beat with his 13 pages, a few brave souls raise their hands. The professor does not accost. He does not judge or ask why. If I were this student that only got 13 pages into the book, I would not want to boast or brag about it. I wouldn't want to let the professor or others know that I didn't read. If I were this student and the professor asked everyone if I had read more, I would find comfort in knowing that there were other students that didn't get the chance to read either.

A different student is given the task is trying to remember everybody's name that we learned during the last class. She gets through most, but doesn't remember everyone's name. Another student tries to pick-up where she left off. One student remembers everyone's name. He begins very quickly rattling off the names when the professor stops him. He says, "Go slowly. I want to take it all in." He knows everyone's names even going as far as giving a few people some nick-names. Every single student is watching, waiting for him to forget a name. He does not. When he completes the difficult task, everyone erupts into applause.

After this, the professor asks a student, "What would you like to do today?" Another student blurts out, "Tell us a story." Others chime in with, "We like your stories." And so, our storyteller teacher, knowing the students are trying to divert his attention, calls them out. "Even though you say you want to hear a story, I think you are trying to divert my attention away from the beginning the next task." Everyone laughs.

It feels as if class is just beginning about 30 minutes after the scheduled start time. The videos we were supposed to watch for today's class are brought up into conversation. One student says, "I forgot to watch the videos." Another student says, "I forgot, too." The professor says, surprisingly and shocked "You forgot, how did so many people forget?" He then poses the question, "What did you do to prepare for class?" Some students mention that they prepared by doing the assigned readings and watching the videos. Others said they looked at the syllabus and so it's concluded that so many people forgot to watch the videos because they did not look at the syllabus. We all learn the lesson of making sure we read the syllabus as part of preparing for class. If this student had not felt comfortable enough to voice his unpreparedness we wouldn't have gone into a group discussion of what we did to prepare for class. If this discussion hadn't happened, we might not have had a group learning moment to prepare for class by reading the syllabus.

The professor continues class by asking us to hold-up our written assignments, our weekly learner notes that are due. Most everybody holds up a sheet of paper. One students hold up his cell phone, another holds up his laptop. The professor reminds us that we should print them out and bring them into class. He turns to the student that showed his laptop and asks him to shut the screen, he tells him he can see what he has prepared but we don't want him to be distracted. He shuts his laptop. We go on with class and the professor asks for volunteers to read what they have written in their learner notes. Once a volunteer is chosen, the professor says "if you are not (the student that is reading), what are you doing?" He wants us to answer, "Just listening." Other responses included chilling and paying attention. Some of the things I hear from the learner notes are:

"Small changes in the classroom turn to big, important things."

“This class has a sense of community. There is a lot of power in allowing time for introductions.”

“Last class, we had deliberate introductions.”

“We can see the importance of being in the now.”

“It’s all in the micro-detailing.”

“Structure was most noteworthy. Introductions make for smoother interactions later.”

“Professor sitting with students is like Gandhi sitting 3rd class.” – a reference to one of the professor’s stories that we should have seen in the assigned video.

“Little acts are important.”

From the students’ responses, it was clear the time the professor took to make introductions was important. It had a big impact on the class. What then, is the importance of ‘deliberate introductions’ and ‘the power of introductions.’

The professor is still sitting in a circle with us. By the second class, the professor should have taken his place at the front of the class behind the podium. Yet, he sits in the circle just like us. Where do small things, especially make a big difference? What is the power dynamic in the classroom? Who determines the outcome of that dynamic? Since small things make a big difference does that lead to violation of what is expected. A violation in a good way. A violation in the sense of feeling more expected, included, purposeful.

Comparing the way this professor sits with us to complete the circle formation to the way a different professor would sit amongst us in a different class is a huge difference, even though their seats are inches apart. Professor Singhal sits with his students in a circle formation, he can see everyone’s faces, he knows every student’s name and he stays focused on class always. In a different class that I’ve taken, the professor sat so he could see everyone’s face and knew everyone’s name and would stay focus on class most of the time, but sat just outside of our semi-circle, semi ‘U’ shaped formation. Instead of sitting in the circle like Dr. Singhal, this professor would have a seat just outside the circle. Sitting just outside of this circle, would set him apart. It was clear to notice who was in charge and those who were not. Dr. Singhal makes sure to sit with us. This tiny change in seat arrangement makes everyone feel included. Dr. Singhal makes us feel equal.

Appendix D

Sample Learner Notes from Two Class Participants

(used anonymously with permission)

Week 1 Learner Notes of Participant #1

January 23, 2017

After our first meeting, the idea of what positive deviance is now forever burned into my brain. The idea that we can all change our way of doing something, with the same resources as everyone else, is the breaking point in anything we can do. When Dr. Singhal walked into the room and sat with all the other students, I was a bit confused at first as to what he was doing. Was he simply reconnecting with old students? Or was he just trying to be a funny professor on the first day of our class. He then asked us if we could all introduce ourselves, but in a sort of game of randomly choosing someone we didn't know in the class room. Yet, each time someone was selected, each person had to repeat all the names of everyone who had already introduced themselves. So not only did we have to randomly choose someone we did not know, we also had to pay attention as to who had already spoken and remember their names. In all my other classes, the professor usually just goes row by row, asking each student to stand up and introduce themselves, but in most cases, the students aren't even paying attention and don't seem to care about the person who may be talking. In Dr. Singhal's class though, that is simply impossible because he makes sure to get everyone engaged into this little game and it allows everyone to introduce themselves in a more personal matter and allow everyone to get to know each other a bit more. We are no longer strangers in the classroom, and approaching one another might be easier now that we have a name to a face. I find this very interesting because just the simple idea of this blows my mind that it can be done in any classroom and could affect a lot in a classroom.

Another thing that Dr. Singhal had us do is for all of us to sit in a circle while we had our first discussion. Most professors typically leave us in our rows, go over the syllabus, and whatever else they may need to talk to us about. Dr. Singhal, instead, asked us some questions, got all of us talking, and in the end explained the reason and meaning behind his class. Not a single moment was wasted and the setting of the classroom was comfortable and opening to everyone. I didn't even feel like I was in class. The conversation from everyone flowed for the three hours of class and not a second seemed to be boring. I feel like if a conversation can be held, and everyone has a chance to voice their opinions and ideas, is a great thing to have in the classroom. Most of the time teachers just read power points word for word until the class is over, and there isn't much conversation in the classroom.

In Dr. Singhal's class, I was at full attention and enjoyed listening to what everyone had to say on the subject at hand. I think if all teachers were to try this approach, most students would enjoy going to class and would learn how to vocalize in the classroom and put all electronics down. I have also learned that if professors take the time to learn our faces and put a name to them, that makes a huge difference for the outcome of the student and teachers relationship. A student might feel more comfortable asking questions and would participate more in class. Just as Dr. Singhal said, "A little bit of conversation can make a huge difference." I

believe this to be true. If there is communication between at least two people, the outcome of something could be greater.

Excerpted Learner Notes of Class Participant #2

(used anonymously with permission)

From Learner Notes #1, January 23, 2017:

This is the first set of learner notes after a very different and interesting first night of class in the “Communicating Positive Deviance for Social Change” course. Initially, the most impactful and different concept was how the instructor began the class, and this concept was continued throughout the length of the class. This concept, as I believe all 27+ students in the class realized, was showing us all how small changes in action can translate into big and positive changes in outcomes in different situations.

A few of the small actions we experienced were the professor sitting with the students and, not once throughout the night, standing at the “front” of the classroom. We also learned most of the names of each other through a series of repetitive introductions made by each student. After introductions, we, to include the professor, sat in a circle for the remainder of the class time. After sitting in a circle, many students shared how they perceived the start of this class was different from other classes, how it was the same, and most importantly, what difference the differences had and could make. Once again, these actions, I believe, showed us how small changes in action can lead to larger/positive outcomes.

Most the students in this class were previous students of the professor and were very enthusiastic about the course, as was evident through their comments and body language during introductions and throughout the class. This enthusiasm by all, to include the first-time students, showed evidence the professor’s PD approach to teaching has resulted in positive outcomes in previous courses and will probably lead to very positive outcomes in this course.

From Learner Notes #2, January 30, 2017:

We continued our classroom behavior, with our professor using a liberating structures style of facilitation throughout the class. We once again sat in a circle, and if we were sitting in the same seat as last class, were asked to move to a different seat. A few students were asked and able to name most students in class. I did bring up the thoughts I had of buy-in, saying I perceived there was buy-in from all of us students on the professor’s liberating structures style of teaching, though after his response to my statement (doesn’t approve of the term buy-in) and re-reading portions of the PD book, I will instead use the words opt-in and/or ownership.

From Learner Notes #3, February 6, 2017:

The exercise we performed in class was very useful to me. The class of 27 (or so) was broken up into teams of three or four. Once we received and started working on the assignment, which was the same for every group, I found that in our team of four, each of us were teaching each other

about the PD steps, and as they say, you know it if you can teach it. It was apparent that this exercise was beneficial for everyone in the class. Everyone in the 7 groups was required to participate and everyone seemed to be understanding and presenting the five PD steps well. I look forward to more group projects to be able to continue developing teamwork skills.

Vita

Vanessa Sandoval is a recent MA graduate from the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). Her graduate work included a focus on Liberating Structures (LS) where she conducted an autoethnographic study on a classroom that employed LS. An avid enthusiast and believer in LS, she works to promote the effective benefits LS can bring both as a consultant and as a Program Assistant, serving in a private corporation based in El Paso, that executes federal contracts. She has helped to facilitate numerous workshops, trainings and professional development sessions on Liberating Structures. She previously worked as a graduate teaching assistant in the capacity of instructor of Public Speaking. She also worked as a student coordinator for the Social Justice Initiative (SJI)—a platform based on the UTEP campus that gathers like-minded individuals to contribute to our community. Founded by two professors, Dr. Arvind Singhal and Lucía Durá, both of whom employ LS in the classroom, the Social Justice Initiative, helps promote LS, the positive deviance approach, and entertainment-education narratives on campus, in the border community, nationally, and globally.

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