

6

Empowered Authenticity: Promoting Collective Consciousness Raising in Educational Settings



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Abstract

Amid the ongoing turmoil of the current political climate, creating community within our classrooms is of vital importance. Creating safe spaces for students to show up authentically and have opportunities to discuss collective consciousness raising is an important step that faculty within the counseling profession can take. This allows our students to show up authentically and feel empowered within the classroom. In this article, I propose two ways that faculty can create safe environments for students to show authentic expressions of creativity and emotion, with the end goal of creating community and collective action within these educational settings.

Keywords: student empowerment, safe spaces, community-building

As an emerging feminist scholar and newly appointed assistant faculty member, I am consistently thinking about creating safe spaces in my classrooms. I chose to be a counselor educator because I want to see positive changes occur within counseling and higher educational settings. The counseling profession has done well in attempting to integrate multicultural competencies into our field (Ratts et al., 2016), but there is a long way to go before we reach equity for marginalized populations (CACREP Vital Statistics, 2024). Within the charged political climate today, many students rightly feel anxious about the future and the impact of potential legislation that could negatively affect certain rights if changed (Wood, 2024).

According to a recent study, students from historically marginalized backgrounds who are more engaged in socio-political activism suffer greater levels of psychological stress (Suzuki et al., 2023). Additionally, not only are students engaged in US politics, but they are also engaged in activism surrounding the many armed conflicts, wars, and genocides affecting multiple parts of the world, including but not limited to Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Haiti, Ukraine, and Syria (Davies et al., 2024). At the forefront of many college activists' efforts is the ongoing genocide happening in Palestine and the erupting war in surrounding countries like Lebanon and Yemen (Rubin et al., 2024). It is important to note that students engaged in

advocacy specifically surrounding the genocide in Gaza (B'Tselem, 2025; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024; United Nations, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024) are suffering from increased psychological strain due to multiple factors, including potential retaliation, expulsion, suspension, social isolation, anxiety and depression (Buheji et al., 2024).

Additionally, many students who are affected by immigration issues, whether directly or indirectly, are personally affected by the current administration's anti-immigration legislation (U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, 2025). It is imperative to note that research regarding this specific era of anti-immigration legislation is limited due to its emergent nature. However, prior tangential research shows an increase in distress and a decrease in enrollment and matriculation among undocumented students and students impacted by increased anti-immigration activity (Gonzales, 2011; Martínez-Calderón, 2009).

To borrow an overused analogy, if a flower is not blooming, we do not blame it for failing to thrive; rather, we examine the soil and the environment in which it is planted and make adjustments to help it successfully grow. Therefore, what can we do to help our students grow in the midst of sociopolitical unrest and turmoil that affects them as emerging professionals? Our field needs to unite under a common banner of social justice advocacy for our

clients, students, peers, and fellow professionals. It is extremely difficult to come together under a single cause without organizing, however. I look to the feminist tenets of collective consciousness raising and promoting authenticity within the educational setting as a guidepost for how to create spaces where students feel supported and empowered (Mahoney, 2018), particularly in discussing polarizing subjects like those aforementioned.

Blackmore (2023) describes collective consciousness raising as having its roots in the Women's Movement of the 1970s and specifically refers to the sharing of experiences of individuals from historically marginalized backgrounds to increase awareness of how personal experiences are connected to the political. It also allows folks to understand that their struggles are interconnected and that they are not alone (Blackmore, 2023). Additionally, the collective understanding of oppression leads to social change (Mahoney, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore ways in which counseling faculty in particular, and faculty in general, can work toward building safe spaces within our classroom communities that promote and allow for collective consciousness raising. This will allow students to build community and create spaces for them to take steps toward collective activism as they share their experiences with one another.

I would like to begin this exploration by exploring the definitions of authenticity and empowerment. Authenticity, as described by bell hooks (1994), refers to the process of self-actualization. As teachers model their professional and "human" selves in the classroom, this opens the space for students to bring their whole selves, not just their academic selves, into educational spaces (hooks, 1994). Exploring collective consciousness raising could also lead to a development of authenticity within certain contexts (Mahoney, 2018). By exploring how students have had to keep parts of themselves outside of the classroom (commonly referred to as "code switching"), and opening up the space for their whole selves, this leads to better outcomes for students in educational environments (Moula et al., 2024). Empowerment is the process of increasing ones' political, interpersonal, and personal power (Gutiérrez, 1999). In the classroom, an example of empowerment can look like educators inviting students whose first language is not English to bring their language into the classroom setting (hooks, 1994). For example, if a student wants to express an idea, but it is rooted in another language, the educator could invite the student to explain the idea in their first language and then translate as they see fit. Essentially, an exploration of the interplay between collective consciousness raising, authenticity, and empowerment within the classroom setting could lead to community-building and advocacy opportunities in educational spaces.

In traditional educational settings in the United States, classroom norms often hinder authenticity and collective consciousness raising (hooks, 1994). There is a decorum that is followed regarding what is considered “professional” appropriacy, and these norms are rooted in patriarchal structures that hinder creative and emotional expression (Pasque & Nicholson, 2023). However, showing up authentically in spaces like the classroom-spaces that have traditionally discouraged individual emotional and creative expression- actually increases student engagement within the learning environment (hooks, 1994). Importantly, students will more fully engage in authenticity if they feel safe enough to do so. Therefore, it is incumbent upon educators to provide such safe spaces for students to feel empowered to share their collective experiences and build community. I suggest two ways in which faculty can do so.

The first example involves creating assignments that honor a student’s freedom of creative expression. In the pursuit of my degree as a counselor, I had the opportunity to demonstrate how I learned advocacy in one of my courses. The assignment gave students, me included, full creative freedom to show how I engaged with the course material and how I interpreted and internalized the information presented throughout the semester. For this assignment, I decided to learn a new song on an instrument that I had recently begun learning, and I performed the song in front of my peers. This was a terrifying

experience for me, one that pushed me out of my comfort zone in ways I hadn’t experienced before. However, the process mirrored my own experiences with learning how to advocate within the counseling profession, and I consider it to be one of the most impactful learning experiences I had while pursuing my degree. I internalized the message of pushing myself to get uncomfortable, trusting in my peers that they would honor my experience, and thoroughly exploring the impact of the course content on my development as an advocate in my profession. This also built intimacy between myself and my peers, and deepened the mutual trust we had with each other, because all of us vulnerably engaged in the assignment and held space for one another. Trust is integral in community building.

Other students expressed similar experiences with the assignment, and completed it in a variety of creative ways, including creating PowerPoints with artwork, infusing humor to their personal growth in the class, and using other mediums like poetry and videos to share their experiences. There was no limit to the ways in which we were encouraged to show our creative expression and learning for this assignment. It is important to note that educators should always lean on the values of autonomy and consent when inviting students to show up authentically, which creates safety for students who may feel uncomfortable engaging in these processes. We encourage

them to show up how they want to show up.

The second way that faculty can promote a safe space for creative and emotional exploration is to first) be willing to discuss difficult subjects that are relevant to student experiences, both personal and political, and second) make room for students to express the emotions that those subjects elicit. To do the first, bring in current events that affect student well-being. Facilitate discussions surrounding how these current and past events have personally affected students. Often, these discussions could be considered taboo in educational spaces. After doing so, allow space for students to express emotion. Avoid discouraging raw feelings in the classroom. Model what it looks like to express feelings that are normally discouraged, such as anguish, anger, fear, and sadness. Cry in front of students if you feel those emotions. This is one way to attend to the power differential and promote showing up authentically. Destigmatize showing raw human emotion in educational settings. Tell students that there is no need to apologize if they get emotional. We are human, after all, and all human emotions should be welcomed in spaces that elicit deep feelings.

In a truly liberatory environment, an environment that “offers space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts,” and freedom to show up authentically

(Specia & Osman, 2015), all emotions are honored. In allowing students to engage in an authentic way, this promotes empowerment and a deepened sense of community and comradery, because students are able to build trust with their peers and with the educational environment (hooks, 1994). It also promotes collective growth, collaborative learning, and empowered action (Belenky et al., 1997; Robert & Kay, 2000). Another way to encourage students to feel safe expressing themselves authentically is to establish group “norms” that are universally agreed upon. These “norms” are predominately created by the students and can act as a safety net so that the group can refer to acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the discussion setting. For example, one group “norm” I frequently suggest is to prohibit hate speech and slurs within the classroom, which allows students to know that while free speech and heightened emotions are permissible, harm in the form of hate speech is not allowed in the space. Another group norm that students frequently suggest is that if one student is speaking, interruptions and speaking over one another is unacceptable.

After the results of the most recent presidential election in 2024, I knew that many of my students would be feeling a range of strong emotions. The majority of my students are from predominantly minoritized populations, and I had an inclination that, many or most, would understandably react negatively to the results of this election. Some of my students were

D.A.C.A. recipients, some have undocumented family members or friends, the majority of my students are women, and some identify as queer. Rather than ignore or have them process these experiences alone, I created what I call “Solidarity Circles” in each of my classes. I invited my students to hold space for one another, and for themselves, during this tumultuous political climate.

If my students were feeling anything like what I was feeling, I knew that coming together and strengthening their community was going to be important. I prefaced these Solidarity Circles by explaining that the purpose was not to push any political agendas, or to point fingers of blame at anyone, but to simply hold a safe space where each student could show up authentically and honor the emotions that they were experiencing. There were only two rules. I would not allow hate speech, and there would be no apologizing for the emotions that were expressed. These circles were powerful. The students held each other’s grief, anger, frustration, fear, and anxiety. Many cried. All held space for one another. The overwhelming feedback I got from the students was gratitude for the opportunity to sit in community with one another rather than ignoring the current political climate.

While I did not initially ask for direct feedback about each student’s reactions to the solidarity circles, I did have some students express their thoughts about the process. With their consent to share, one

student emailed me and said

“I want to express my gratitude for allowing us to share our thoughts and feelings about the election’s outcome. It has been challenging for many of us, and many students have not had the opportunity to express their feelings”.

Another student emailed and said,

“To hear others share my frustrations and sadness, and alternatively, to hear different viewpoints about the political system was both necessary and interesting to experience...I knew I was angry and disappointed coming into session, and reflecting on it now, that anger stems from those feelings of sadness. I felt sad thinking about how the election results can negatively impact women’s bodily autonomy, policies regarding the Department of Education (which directly impacts the careers we are heading into), and the safety and security of marginalized populations”.

At the end of the last solidarity circle, one student stated they felt grateful that they had this space because they thought other faculty wanted to talk about the election results but didn't know how to go about it and ended up not providing space to do so. Therefore, the takeaway I gleaned was that these spaces were an important part of honoring the students' experiences and creating space for them to process together.

Some obstacles that educators could face relate to their own comfort in showing up authentically, as well as working with students who are hesitant to express their experiences. To model engaging in the educational environment in an authentic way, it is important for educators to challenge themselves to get comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. This requires an exploration of their own understanding and involvement with power dynamics in the classroom, as well as a willingness to relinquish a certain amount of control. Introspection is a key part of exploring their own sense of self, and how comfortable they feel showing up authentically with students. Additionally, working with students who are resistant to change, and authentic engagement is likely. As mentioned above, it is imperative that educators lean on autonomy and consent when inviting students to be their authentic selves in the classroom. This promotes a sense of safety for students because they will come to

understand that they can show up in a way that feels comfortable and congruent to who they are.

While many professors may not feel adequately trained in leading a group discussion like Solidarity Circles, I would like to offer some practical suggestions in facilitating safe group spaces. First, establish safety for the students by discussing informed consent. This includes a rough outline of the discussion timeline (introductions, approximate length of the group discussion, ensuring that what is discussed in the group stays in the group as much as possible, etc.). Second, establish group norms, as previously discussed in this article. Third, as the facilitator, allow space for flexibility. Try not to intervene to allow students to take up most of the space. Lean into silence and discomfort. Practice appropriate self-disclosure related to prescient topics. Lastly, after closing the discussion, I suggest a short water or bathroom break before resuming normal classroom activities for students to comfortably transition back to scholastic topics. For further guidance on leading group discussions, see links provided on Appendix A (however, please keep in mind the limits to your expertise and scope of practice; these are guidelines for counseling professionals but may still be helpful in guiding group discussions).

Empowered action is the ultimate goal of facilitating collective consciousness raising and promoting authenticity within the classroom setting. By creating

these safe spaces, students will have the opportunity to address complex issues and controversial topics with the hope of maintaining respect for each other and growing together (Pan & Mulcher, 2000). With enough of these liberatory experiences, the goal is for students to feel empowered enough to enact collective change through community building within the classroom environment (Wilson et al., 2010).



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