

Village Style Learning

Teaching Diversity Through the Experiential

Lourie Davis

A Diverse Style of Teaching

This article describes a diverse style of teaching that could be adopted by school administrators who are interested in creating a school culture where success is nurtured using a community approach. This community approach of teaching is built on a pedagogy I developed and named Village Style Learning (VSL).

The philosophy of VSL involves the practice of learning that creates a community environment which promotes modes of understanding, critical examining, and learning from concrete experiences (hooks, 2003). Within this community, everyone becomes part of a village, and each village becomes part of the community.

My development of the pedagogy of VSL began when a student started missing class. He had never missed class before. His personal information had changed, and his phone number was disconnected. Continuing to seek out information, I asked the students, "Have you seen or heard from John?" The students looked puzzled when asked the question.

At that moment, there was a cloud of silence. No one knew John. Weeks later, John's mother informed the college that John had died. I was devastated. Talking with John's mother, she discussed how much John loved school. At that point, a

teacher and a mother cried for the loss of a funny, kind, intelligent, and philosophical young man.

A Learning Community

The idea of students not knowing their classmates was unsettling to me as an educator, but what was more unsettling was the fact that I had not been aware that my students were not connected to each other. I began to question myself. What do I want my students to know? How will I teach them that they matter, that their voices and their actions matter? How can I teach them that what matters most is a connection?

After engaging in the Socratic method of questioning, I had an intuitive thought. The thought was to develop connection among the students within the classroom by turning the classroom into a learning community. Thus, in the spring of 2011, the idea of changing the classroom into a community through the pedagogy of VSL was implemented.

I chose a process of randomly placing students in groups. Everyone introduces himself or herself to the others to develop a village name, a village intention, and a village image. For example, the village POLLA name represents letters of everyone's name; in addition, POLLA represents peace, organization, love, life, and ambition.

These words reflect the characteristics of everyone within the village. POLLA continues their connection through creating a village intention. POLLA's intention consists of having clear communication with each other, being on time for class,

being helpful to each other, and always sticking together. POLLA's idea of always sticking together was consistent in their village image.

The image of POLLA is a circle with six layers of three colors that blends the colors red that symbolizes love, yellow that symbolizes peace, and green that symbolizes unity. When POLLA presented their identity to the community, it was obvious that relationships formed connections. Everyone became a part of something bigger than himself or herself; all became part of the same community.

Emphasis on Structure

The pedagogy of VSL was developed from my experience as a licensed social worker, a mental health clinician, and a registered art therapist. My vision of VSL was to place emphasis on the structure of a community through a system of symbols, meanings, and relationships. The system of relationships consists of students engaging with individuals who reflect difference and sameness. The system of meaning consists of students creating a village that has an intention, and the system of symbols involves using images to represent village identities.

Teaching the concept of community through villages builds on critical race theory through the action of transforming the classroom into a community of power sharing. No village has a position of superiority, which instills the action of power sharing by eliminating the role of sovereign power within the villages and the classroom community at large.

Lourie Davis is an adjunct faculty member teaching dance, visual arts, performing arts, film, and psychology at Wayne County Community College, Detroit, Michigan.

© 2019 by Caddo Gap Press

In other words, the pedagogy of VSL fosters a diverse style of teaching that embraces individual and cultural differences. The intuitive pedagogy of VSL embraces the action of “creating an agenda that promotes teaching that embraces cultural differences [as] an asset to the design instruction that builds on a student’s experiential knowledge and challenges inequities” (Viesca, Torres, Barnatt, & Piazza, 2013, p. 97).

The design of instruction for this pedagogy is to create learning experiences that represent equality. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), authors of the book *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, “many liberals believe in equality, especially equal treatment for all persons, regardless of their different histories or current situations” (p. 26).

Therefore my role as a liberal educator is to provide learning experiences that reflect equal treatment for all students. Thus using the concept of community and village learning in the classroom creates equality and social change by executing learning experiences that open a doorway to understanding the social structure of diversity. The intention of VSL is to change the perception of social identity by examining the concepts of sameness, difference, and humanity through experiential and community learning.

Belonging and Loving

Community learning not only creates a school culture where accomplishment is nurtured but also creates a space of belonging and love. In the book *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, educator and author bell hooks (2003) gave validity to a belief that a school culture of love and belonging teaches the concept of diversity by learning to be critically conscious of differences without allowing differences to separate.

hooks characterized the loss of connection with students and coworkers as one of the dangers that our educational system faces. She believed that regaining connection with students is done through community. Her words gave language to my intuitive way of gaining connection through the community approach of VSL and teaching diversity through experiential learning. Furthermore, learning experiences allow students to understand the meaning of the concepts being taught.

For example, my dual enrollment high school students who are also enrolled in college courses were given an experiential learning assignment. The assignment involved the concept of experiential learning

by engaging in a learning activity that would teach the concepts of difference and sameness. The experiential learning assignment involved surprising a group of high school seniors in Flint, Michigan, who had their prom canceled because of the water crisis in that city.

Each village’s assignment was to raise awareness of the issue by placing a display in the main atrium of the school. In addition to raising awareness, the students were asking for donations to provide a pizza party for the Flint high school seniors whose prom had been canceled.

As I observed the students engaging in the experiential learning project, it appeared that the students were gaining a deeper meaning of the concept of difference and sameness. The intention was for students to experience the concepts of individuality and sameness within themselves and Flint’s high school students. The message of sameness was recognized when Flint’s high school seniors Skyped my students to say thank you for their pizza party.

Telling Their Stories

Reflecting on this social learning experience reveals how experiences are expressed by stories and how stories are explained by the way they are told. The aim of the project is that the students will tell their story of how they made a difference in the lives of a group of high school students during Flint’s water crisis. The goal for the learning experience was for students to understand through experiencing and recognizing that there are all kinds of ways to be different and the same. “Experiences shapes how different people and groups think” (Andersen & Collins, 2006, p. 7).

The learning experience that opened my eyes to the aesthetics of sameness involved a community of film and visual arts students who participated in a field trip to the opening of the film *Black Panther*. Students were given extra credit for wearing traditional African dress or some other form of African tradition. Everyone in the theater, who came from a blend of cultures, connected through the beauty of sameness. Every person from every culture had on some form of traditional African dress.

The concept of sameness was not only reflected by individuals who looked the same through their expression of dress but also by the action of listening and watching the film as a community.

The film *Black Panther* was used as a vehicle to discuss how race played a part in

demoralizing and uplifting how individuals think and feel; in addition, the film turned the concept of White normativity into a picture of Black normativity. The concept of Black normativity was created through a fictional environment that defined a group of African people through their practice, attitudes, and ideologies as the norm.

The strategy here is to view Black life managed under a regime of knowledge, power, and subjectivity. In summary, I believe the story of the film also used the concepts of exceptionalism and community to portray a group of Black people united and standing in the center of a narrative.

Structure of Community

The narrative of what makes VSL unique is the emphasis it places on the structure of community—the system of relationships, purpose, and meaning, in addition to the use of experiential and action learning. The pedagogy of VSL focuses on action and experiential learning as a gateway to social change through understanding cultural identities, values, and experiences.

In other words, “diversity initiatives spread the idea that despite differences, people are really the same” (Andersen & Collins, 2006, p. 9). The idea of sameness and difference starts with changing the perception of social identity and the discourse on difference and sameness.

Thus the purpose of VSL is to change the perception of social identity by examining the concepts of sameness, difference, and humanity through experiential learning. The pedagogy of VSL creates a space that teaches from a standpoint aimed at liberating the minds of students through experiential learning, encouragement, and support. The heart of VSL is in its philosophy, a philosophy that embraces and promotes learning through modes of understanding and critical examining.

My community of multicultural high school students displayed the philosophy of VSL through their oral presentations. One of the questions in the presentation assignment was “What did you learn in this psychology community?” Out of 17 students, 13 stated, “You and my community taught me I have a voice and my voice matters.” Listening to the students stating that they have a voice and that knowing their voice matters demonstrated how those students have learned to think both consciously and unconsciously.

At that moment, I realized that the pedagogy of VSL and the practice of experiential

learning had academically reshaped the content of learning by interrupting and reworking the old ideologies of traditional teaching. Implementing the concepts of community and experiential learning can open a doorway to how to teach students that they matter and that their voices matter. In addition, using the concept of community in the classroom can create equality and social change by executing learning experiences that open a doorway to understanding the social structure of citizenship.

Conclusion

This article reflects a diverse style of teaching methods that liberates the student's mind through the doorway of experiential and community learning. The pedagogy of VSL is a community approach that promotes modes of understanding, critically examining and learning from concrete experiences.

These methods can be adopted by school administrators and teachers who are interested in creating a culture where success is nurtured using a community approach. Within this community approach of VSL, everyone becomes part of a village, and each village becomes part of a community.

References

- Allen, A. F., & Szostak, R. (2016). Introducing interdisciplinary studies. In A. F. Repko & R. Szostak (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary research: Process and theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Andersen, M. L., & Collins, P. H. (2006). *Race, class, and gender: An anthology* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (Eds.). (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- DiAngelo, R. (2011). White fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3(3), 54–70. Retrieved from <https://libjournal.uncg.edu/index.php/ijcp/article/view/249/116>
- Holley, K. A. (2009). Defining interdisciplinarity: Understanding interdisciplinary challenges and opportunities. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 2(35). <https://doi.org/10.1002/aehe.v35:2>
- hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Noddings, N. (1998). *Philosophy of education*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Viesca, K. M., Torres, A. S., Barnatt, J., & Piazza, P. (2013). When claiming to teach for social justice is not enough: Majoritarian stories of race, difference, and meritocracy. *Berkeley Review of Education*, 4(1), 97–122. <https://doi.org/10.5070/B84110002>
- Wise, T. (2012). *Dear White America: Letter to a new minority*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights.