Engaging Students in Assessing Classroom Culture

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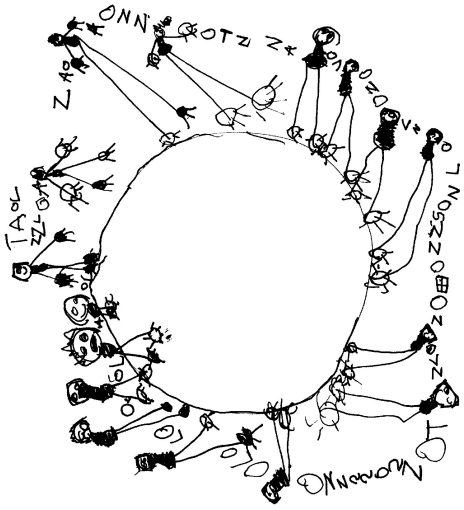

In Brené Brown's (2012) book *Daring Greatly,* she claims that she can tell a lot about the culture and values of groups based on their answers to a list of ten questions. With some minor adaptations, I presented these questions to students in my courses in an attempt to engage my students in reflecting with me about the culture of our class.

1. What classroom/learning behaviors are rewarded? Punished?
2. On what and how are students actually spending their time and attention?
3. What rules and expectations are followed, enforced, and ignored?
4. Do people feel safe and supported talking about how they feel and asking for what they need?
5. What are the sacred cows? Who is most likely to tip them? Who stands the cows back up?
6. What stories are legend and what values do they convey?
7. What happens when someone fails, disappoints, or makes a mistake?
8. How is vulnerability (uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure) perceived?
9. How prevalent are shame and blame and how are they showing up?
10. What's the collective tolerance for discomfort? Is the discomfort of learning, trying new things, and giving and receiving feedback normalized, or is there a high premium put on comfort (and how does that look)? (pp. 174-175)

Related to teacher education, this was an opportunity for my students to explicitly discuss classroom culture, and consider their own role in establishing culture in their future classrooms and in relationships with students.

Related to feminist pedagogy, I was specifically interested in how their answers to these questions help me to understand things about my own practice. Specifically:

- how students and I position ourselves or are positioned,
- who has authority, and what types, and
- the relationships between the students' perspectives of our classroom culture and my own.

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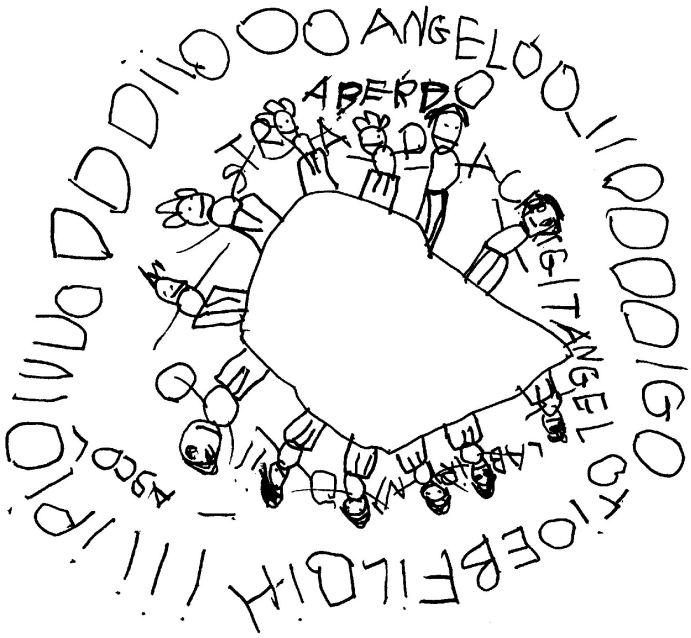

Themes and wonderings based on my students' answers:

- I set the expectations. According to students, these expectations are: complete the reading assignments, respect each other, and be willing to experiment with new ideas. Only the first is written in the syllabus. How are the other two communicated?
- I don't enforce the expectations or penalize students who do not meet them; students feel that the expectations were enforced by the environment itself or by their peers. For instance, "I think the small class size helped to hold students accountable…I wasn't prepared for one class, and I couldn't add much to the conversation." Another student said, "Shame is not present unless someone doesn't read for class." Is this relational accountability helpful? Was the shame something I contributed to? If so, how?
- Students saw the chance to continually resubmit their assignments as something that established a culture for learning. For instance, "Students are given second chances. They can try again and resubmit the assignment. There are no mistakes, only multiple opportunities." Another student said, "[Being able to turn in drafts] allowed us to see what our strengths and weaknesses were and allowed us to correct mistakes. This environment was supportive of mistakes."
- Students spoke of the class without the explicit mention of the teacher most of the time. For instance, "*we* were able to discuss our ideas and challenge each other's thinking," "we rely *on each other* for advice," and "…being able to receive feedback, see my mistakes, and Leslie's suggestions," which demonstrates that I was just one valuable perspective. How does the power I have as the instructor potentially promote or hinder this communitarian environment?

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