

IL108 Reinventing Education

I engaged with this module in multiple forms and so it follows that my expression of this journey of challenging educational assumptions, is in multiple forms. This written piece will begin by reflecting on the reasons for my artistic creation and how it visually represents the change in me upon experiencing a utopian, educational environment. Then, I seek to engage with the aspect of education that most interests me, the impact of community in creating an effective learning space, while critically evaluating it against my purpose of education. And finally, while painting felt apt as a medium for the project, it didn't feel complete on its own, so in the spirit of creating knowledge and new understandings, I share specifics on how camp communities are built each summer, in the hope that whoever reads this may perhaps take a small, relevant piece of this utopia and implement it in their educating.



Why the painting?

My project has evolved a lot since its conception, but it began with this painting and wanting to create a self-reflective artistic piece. In keeping with Marshall McLuhan's idea that the medium is the message, it felt important to represent my journey through this module of reinventing education by engaging in a medium that felt off-limits and beyond my capabilities for so long. It is a direct rebellion against my younger self being penned into the specific box of science and maths at school. My success in the traditional exams of these empirical subjects had me labelled as logical, pragmatic, and intelligent, even more so for surpassing many boys in what were 'boys' subjects', and so with

that positive reinforcement from adults, I leaned into the label and I divorced myself from my creativity and stifled my emotion. *Who would I have become if I had been allowed a holistic education as a child?*

My experience with holistic education didn't come until I was 19 years old, trapped in a full-blown identity crisis as I grappled with academic failure for the first time. I escaped that summer to the USA to work at a Girl Scout camp and found myself in an educational environment that felt safe and had no expectations of who I was or what I should be. This environment gave me the confidence to drop out of my Chemistry degree and pursue Modern Languages instead. The paintings are contrasting self-portraits of who I was having solely experienced the dystopia of traditional British schooling, and who I gave myself permission to become after experiencing the utopia of summer camp. *How much sooner would I have begun self-actualising and thriving if all facets of my true self had been allowed to develop?*

The first painting has a limited, primary colour palette with expanding squares to depict the expanding knowledge of a student in what are deemed core subjects, with some slight interdisciplinarity occurring late on. It was done with oil paint to signify the traditional aspect of the banking school model, as discussed by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where students are simply containers to fill. The second painting, in contrast, fills the whole canvas and blends and introduces more colour and media types to illustrate the fluidity, freedom and fullness a utopian educational setting allows in a student, but still retains the building blocks of the three primary colours in oil paint. The hardest part of creating the paintings was letting go of the idea of them being good, because letting go of those standards meant letting go of the standards against which I



have always valued myself. Without having been introduced to the concept of ungrading and practising self-reflective validation in this module, I am not sure I would have been able to give myself permission to submit art as part of an assessment and bring the freedom of creativity I feel at summer camp into an institutional education setting. In Jesse Stommel's "Why I Don't Grade", he mentions his 4-word pedagogy: Start by trusting students. *But how do we learn to trust ourselves?*

Why is community so important to education?

The purpose of this section is to engage with the idea that the community and environment in which we learn is the most important factor in successful education. But how to define successful education? After my journey through this module, my definition of the purpose of education is to self-actualise, to grow and develop the emotional responses needed to move through the world with compassion and learn to thrive as an individual embedded in wider society. A successful education system would then be characterised as having helped each child (or adult) fulfil their potential and be a fulfilled person in the world. And American-style summer camps often succeed in doing exactly this.

My initial explanation for this success is that they are the antithesis of school as we know it in the modern world. I know many a camp director who has declared that camp's main function is to provide respite from traditional schooling, and yet the dystopic nature of conventional teaching only became apparent to me upon examining camp communities through the lens of being learning utopias and places for self-actualisation and growth. The very nature of camp inspires utopic hopeful thinking, being surrounded by children encourages a childlike way of looking at how the world should be as opposed to being constrained by practicalities. It's about being able to say yes in some form to every suggestion and disrupt the perceived rigidity of the 'real world' where children are so frequently told "No." Do they want to drive cars? Ok, let's design and build cardboard ones we can have races in around fake tracks on the field. Do they want to go for a moonlight paddle, but night boating is not allowed due to the danger of low visibility? Ok, let's sit on the docks in the evening instead, close our eyes and tell stories of boat adventures in the dark. These campers may not remember the exact stories we told or the races we did, but they'll remember how they felt, I remember how I felt watching them, learning to imagine and suggest and collaborate in the community we had created. In this context, communities can be defined as shared environments with agreed-upon values. The best communities for growth encourage safe risk-taking and expanding of comfort zones, and can often be characterised as:

- 1) Supportive/Non-competitive
- 2) Inclusive/Balanced
- 3) Understanding/Connected
- 4) Fun/Exciting

all of which concepts track with the existing literature on educational communities, particularly in bell hooks's books.

Allowing members to define success themselves, with no assessments or grades, is key to creating a non-competitive, supportive atmosphere. Different campers, and staff, will have different boundaries as to what is a challenge for them, and therefore what counts as a victory. As discussed in chapter 11 of bell hooks' *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Love* "emphasis on competition furthers the sense that students stand in an adversarial relationship to themselves and their teachers" and camp directly refutes that emphasis, instead allowing everyone to succeed because every challenge is by individual choice. Though this approach assumes that children have the tools to

self-reflect and judge boundaries already, we should remember that in safe learning environments, a child will feel comfortable taking risks on risk-taking and if a misjudgement occurs, the community is there to support the child in their learning.

Another facet is the implementation of holistic activities that account for everyone as a whole and balance different areas of growth. Thich Nhat Hanh's way of thinking about pedagogy emphasized wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit and inspired bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress* to describe a utopic education where "Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process." The inclusion of staff in growth at camp is vital in allowing learning to be role-modelled and evident in the fact that teacher-student barrier with knowledge only flowing one way, first challenged by Freire, has been broken down. Staff also usually have the autonomy to adapt their programme as they set fit to create the right circumstances for success, making flexibility a highly valued skill. Moreover, the open curricula of camps allow for camp directors to reflect on the missions of their camp and choose holistic activities with intentionality, whether they be pedagogically critical, and outer-directed to attempt to foster radical social change, or contemplative, and inner-directed to help campers find balance and wholeness in their lives. A balance is normally struck, which fits with Kaufman's elaboration on the combination of these two seemingly juxtaposed pedagogies in his *Critical Contemplative Pedagogy*; chapter 4 on fostering intentionality particularly resonates with the approach of camp directors and speaks to the purpose of education I defined above, whereby it should seek to create both thriving in wider society and self-actualisation.

The importance of connection between everyone in a camp community cannot be understated. Charters and rules to respect are crafted with each new group to allow everyone's values to be heard and understood and bell hooks' pedagogy of love is frequently exemplified in interactions between all - "Teaching with love brings us the insight that we will not be able to have a meaningful experience in the classroom without reading the emotional climate of our students and attending to it." However, bell hooks' statement "Teachers are not therapists" is contradicted both etymologically - the generic name for camp staff is counselor, and practically as counselors do often find themselves being everything rolled into one, connecting with individual campers as parent figures, teachers, friends, therapists, and older siblings and developing multi-faceted loving relationships.

Lastly, camp disrupts the idea that you can't have fun while learning. bell hooks discusses with Ron Scapp in chapter 10 of *Teaching to Transgress* how her colleagues will say "Students seem to really enjoy your class. What are you doing wrong?" the implication being that no serious, useful teaching is happening. The magic of camp is in the fun and whimsy, and as mentioned above, the scope to say yes. It makes learning so exciting, it disguises how much boundaries are being pushed, and it's only upon a parent or outside figure remarking on their exponential growth and development, that a camper will realise just how transformational a summer at camp has been.

How is a camp community built?

A successful camp community has been established as being supportive, inclusive, understanding and fun, all to create that safe space where risks can be taken, and learning can follow and fulfil the purpose of education. But how is that environment achieved? A key framework for examining camp environments that I was introduced to by Katrina Dearden, the Camp Director of Rock Hill Camp for the summers I was there, is the analogy of bricks and mortar. The bricks are the main building blocks and represent the actual activities and classes that may be offered at camp, they are the substance and indeed important (otherwise there would be no camp) but ultimately, they are interchangeable

– brick can be exchanged for stone, in the same way a boating session could be exchanged for swim time. However, what holds the structure together and cannot be exchanged is the mortar, the glue in the fabric of the community, and it is made up of everything environmental – ranging from who gets hired, to which songs will be sung at dinner. Mortar is more important, there will always be a substance available with which to build, but without creating the mortar, the building will collapse. This analogy helps shift the focus and energy away from the content being learnt, as that can and always will need to be adapted, and onto the environment being learnt in.

The ensuing discussion on how community is tangibly built at summer camp bears resemblance to the guide, *Contemplative Community in Higher Education: A Toolkit*, created by CMind, The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, but focuses more on multi-age learning communities and the quirks of creating community with several levels in a residential setting. I found it more practical to engage with this creation of knowledge by writing it in instruction form but it is by no means, a fully comprehensive guide, it simply serves to highlight just some of the aspects that need to be considered when building a camp community, gathered from personal experiences, conference talks and podcasts such as Go Camp Pro, CampNerd and CampCode.

1) Recruitment and diversity

The first pillar in creating an effective learning community is ensuring the right people are there, both children and staff. To do this, an understanding of the wider community being served and an acknowledgement of who camp has traditionally served, the white middle-class, is needed. Evaluate how your camp community reflects the demographics of the area. Who is underrepresented? Who is overrepresented? Is this consistent across both staff and campers, or do you have campers of colour who don't get to see themselves in leadership? Representation matters and this is a chance to create the space for role models that campers can relate to on a personal level and further engender the feeling to connection and community. A useful framework when looking to diversify, that was presented at the American Camp Association Northeast Camp Conference 2020, is ACT.

- a. Accept that the recruiting norm will not be enough and that further, targeted reaching into excluded communities is necessary. Make sure there are a range of photos in your marketing and consider paying your staff of marginalised communities more. After all, they are bringing a desired quality to the table that no one else is.
- b. Create pathways for inclusion and equity by showcasing staff in areas they wouldn't traditionally be expected in and breaking stereotypes. Create resources to support staff and campers of marginalised groups and seek to understand the barriers to entry. For instance, are there helmets at the climbing wall that will fit over textured hair? Which changing room do non-binary people go to before swimming?
- c. Train for potential situations when mistakes and slip-ups will inevitably be made, better to take a chance in supporting historically excluded people than not attempt at all for ease. Teach staff to answer and engage with curious questions honestly as it provides inquisitive children with the necessary language, instead of dodging.

The other thing to consider is the number of staff, too few and the summer will not function, too many and the age of the community skews too old and the dynamic becomes more rigid. While a range of personality types is needed, the staff hired should all be willing to buy-in to the community being created and dedicate themselves to the goals and mission at hand.

2) Staff training

The purpose of staff training is to create community among staff that allows growth but also teaches them how to create it each week with new campers. It sets the tone for the whole summer, building the framework for staff to succeed in their roles and campers to have an enjoyable experience.

The most successful staff trainings are the ones that insist on personal reflection and create the culture of growth and development, instead of learning a staff manual by rote. Scott Arizala mentioned in a talk called "Bloom" at the ACA Northeastern Camp Conference how generation Z, the average age of young staff, have not internalised 'being busy equals being successful' in the same way older adults might have and so a shift in how staff training is approach is needed. Focus on competencies like decision-making and teamwork and how they apply to work with campers and curate specific protocols and procedures counselors need to know, modelling the situations they may face so they may draw from experience and feel equipped to handle whatever is thrown at them. This frees them up to be human and spontaneous, connecting with campers and embarking on a learning journey with them. Typical sessions might include name games, 'low ropes' team-building exercises, managing stress, evaluating and appreciating different personality types, role-play scenarios, and emergency procedures. As for personal reflection, it can be ceremonial and framed as creating a clean slate - asking staff to write on rocks what they wish to leave behind and tossing them in the lake, or it can be individual and forward-thinking - choosing a charm that represents a goal and carrying it with them throughout the summer on a bracelet as a reminder. If the emotional state of the staff group allows it, a vulnerability exercise such as Core Stories from The Summer Camp Society, linked below, could prove transformational and it certainly was when I participated as it allowed for the reciprocal trust to be created and contributed further to the creation of a safe space.

There should also be time for natural community building so allow downtime for informal interpersonal bonding based on genuine connection and don't pack the schedule full! Secret Buddy provides a useful tool to continue forging connections in a way that won't come across forced. The parameters may vary, but the concept is that everyone is assigned a buddy to whom they do secret things, whether that be writing them a note, buying some sweeties, or going the extra mile in helping them complete a task, all of which adds the feeling of belonging safety in the community.

3) Intentional mortar choices

Similar to the concepts of shaping the space in On Being: Better conversations starter guide, this third pillar is about the intentional choices made in creating mortar that bring the community together.

- a. Mealtimes: Should meals be served family-style, where bonding with tablemates can occur, or buffet style, to prioritise camper choice in the food they eat and who they sit with? A common tactic to create community intermingling at mealtimes is to send campers into the hall random group by group, for example, "If you're wearing a blue item of clothing, you may go in first" and "If your hair is tied up today, you can head in next." Decide how peaceful you want mealtimes to be. Food can be overwhelming for some so recognise parameters may need to be set to control the volume and chaos that breaks out when iconic singing and table banging happens.
- b. Feedback: how do you gather feedback? Do you only ask staff, or are campers encouraged too? If it's a suggestion box, is it in a location people feel they can discreetly drop their ideas?

- c. Language choices, there are thousands of possibilities here but here are a few I have seen that foster inclusion: using gender-neutral terms when addressing groups of campers, decolonising and removing language with native American connotations like 'Village Chief' or 'Totem pole', greeting a camper as 'Friend' if you don't know their name and perhaps the most impactful in my opinion, reframing homesickness as homemissing or homeloneliness to avoid connotations of illness and kids wanting to visit the nurse.
- d. Communication: does your camp allow technology? What would be the impact of allowing or banning it? Some camps ban technology to remove causes for jealousy, some ban it to force campers to disconnect from the hyperconnected virtual world and connect with each other, some camps allow tech and argue it's such an intrinsic part to who young people are these days that it would be absurd to ask them to give it up. Are care packages and mail allowed? If so, how often should it be distributed and at what point in the day?
- e. Rest time: a breeding ground for bullying or a crucial part of the day for campers to decompress? Does it allow campers time to bond informally and in the way they desire or does it allow for exclusion?
- f. Camper choice: how much say do campers get in their schedule? Is it all individualised or all planned in one group with no flexibility? Perhaps individualised would result in a very wide community, but maybe not very deep without repeated contact and time spent together?
- g. Magic: what are you encouraging people to believe in? Will they bond over it? It's not uncommon for there to be camp fairies and mythical creatures who respond to letters!
- h. Phasing out tired traditions: Times change and a summer camp should too. Evaluate if any traditions are being clung onto that are disrupting the community rather than creating it. Harsh pranks, individual callouts, singing alone in front of a group, anything that may cause embarrassment should be phased out.

4) Smooth running from the core management team

This pillar significantly impacts having a good summer versus having a great summer. Firstly, your core staff should all be competent and confident enough to deal with complex schedules. Devise a system of inter-peer work checking that allows for mistakes to be caught and amended before going out to general staff. Secondly, your core staff must still buy into the purpose of camp and understand that a successful summer camp cannot be run as just a business, for risk of losing the culture that makes it special and attractive. Lastly, an active presence is vital to seeing the communities you want created and the culture you want implemented. Making sure you're available at mealtimes and walking round in the day to give individual attention to both staff and campers and you praise specifically, it's an easy way to enact a trickle-down of emotions. Core staff are the ultimate role models and a willingness to be goofy and get things publicly wrong, makes others feel safe in making mistakes and being silly.

5) Tradition

Tradition is important in community creation as shared traditions and memory create an ingroup to which people can belong. The most common pitfall is new arrivals not being welcomed into the fold which is when dedicated systems like buddy pairs of returning/new members allow the space for open teaching and learning. In the spirit of the community being a safe space for risk-taking, it applies to tradition too! Give new friends permission to participate in these traditions, however

incorrectly. Traditions at camp could include songs, the routine of when big events are each week, table banging sequences, chants, dances and ceremonies like opening or closing campfires.

6) Connection to nature

This can take many different forms for many different camps, but a vast majority will have something that seeks to address a connection to nature, be it a wilderness camp the cooks every meal on a fire, or a city camp that heads to the local park once a week. In New York State, for example, there exist groups like the Fresh Air Fund that serve children from urban areas, but their camps are located out of the city, providing these children with an unexpected environment that disrupts the prevalence of technology and allows freedom. Inspired by the No Child Left Inside movement that seeks to encourage and fund environmental education, Meg Phillips, a camp professional, acknowledges in her senior capstone project, *Get the Kids Outside*, that classrooms stifle creativity and indoor spaces confine the imagination while using the outdoors as a classroom allows for the use of natural resources as a teaching mechanism for students. In terms of community creation, it doesn't matter what you are doing as long as it is outside, fostering that relationship with nature and leveraging the shared responsibility for the natural world to create links.

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