

Reflections for the Sheedy Award Presentation

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“Killing or overthrowing the professor” is not something one would think a teacher would want to encourage his or her students to do. Yet this is the sort of execution that the learning community requires. The first days of the learning community are crucial. So named “students” and “professor” enter a class, in its first days, with expectations about roles. Students are expected to listen, professors expected to speak. Professors profess, students osmotically absorb, passively lifting blips of information here and there that seem important. When the “professor” offers up the talking head to the guillotine for the sake of learning a crisis of roles occurs: identities are thrown up into the air. **THE PROF HAS BEEN SILENCED! WHO WILL SPEAK?**

This may cause discomfort in those of us who rely upon the expectations and assumptions we all make when we enter a classroom—as student, as TA, as professor. However, when the professor is dead, our identities become more fluid in a state of ambiguity and ambivalent role expectations. The old regime of *professor teaching* has collapsed. The sociologist Robert Merton described ambivalence as a situation where contradictory normative expectations are attached to a particular role. With the professor silenced, students realize the multiple expectations of this ambivalence. There is room to move in this crisis. The first stages of any revolution are critical; in the moment of ambiguity and role ambivalence, when “the professor is dead,” the multifaceted nature of the student role comes to the fore. In this crisis, the student is forced to negotiate the different role expectations: to speak or not to speak, to listen attentively or not to listen, to participate or withdraw, to learn or not to learn. This crisis need not lead to classroom anarchy, but rather it gives rise to the construction of a new identity. Nothing can be taken for granted if the professor is dead. This moment of ambivalence requires the construction of a new social self, a learning community self, and it is this self that is responsible for the class material and takes charge of learning.

Chris mentioned his connections with students from his CORE classes, where learning happens because of “talking heart to heart.” This is an example of how the

learning community identity is something different; something real because the student must construct a new identity within the circle, a different self that is seen and that can be seen in a context of freedom and learning. And this self emerges and is sustained through communication and interaction within the learning community. Though one lesson from my classes in the learning community is that society is prior in every way—with its roles and expectations—the learning community must be continually created and sustained through interaction and navigation of this original ambivalence. It cannot be “taken for granted.”

Teaching manuals and education research say that *Interaction* is the key to learning. Interaction is also the means of sustaining the learning community. Further, in the learning communities I have participated in, the subject material related to the claims of Symbolic Interaction theory in Sociology. Symbolic Interactionism is based on the premise that there is a subjective experience of society concerned with the way in which people give meaning to their bodies, their feelings, their selves, their experiences and the wider social world in which they and we exist. This, like the learning community, happens through interaction. Symbolic interactionism requires us to focus on how we construct the meanings of everyday life and reality as a whole through interaction rather than cognitive processes. The method of Symbolic Interaction can only be learned through participation in constructing reality, not passively through osmotic absorbing lectures or reading material. The learning community is a venue for sharing how meanings are constructed in the “outside” social world. “Housekeeping,” as was mentioned before, is a way for the student and his/her experiences to interact with theory, to *learn through doing* symbolic interaction, by reflecting on meanings in our everyday lives and the contexts of the wider social world. There can be teaching of theories and applications without learning, but there cannot be learning without the student’s participatory interaction between the self-as-constructed and the concepts from class material.

The learning community also opens the role of teacher. Western society values flapping tongues over listening ears. However, one recalls the Turkish proverb: Having two ears and one tongue, we should listen twice as much as we speak. For one in a “teaching role”, the experience of the learning community pedagogy reminds us of the

value of listening as both teachers and students. The tenets of the Learning community have proven invaluable to my own goals as a TA for the introductory sociology course. They have helped me attune to the all-important task of the teacher to facilitate interaction and participate through *listening and response*.

To conclude, the learning community fosters an environment where the student activates his/her identity as *learner*. Anything learned is not a result of disconnected presentation of material by a talking head professing professor, but rather a product of the interaction between members of the learning community. Though it is not about teacher *teaching per se*, the learning community offers a crossroads between experience and concepts, an invaluable technique for any *teacher interested in student learning*.