Bertha Centre for Social Innovation & Entrepreneurship

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Classrooms for Change 2021: Lessons Learnt in Taking Vulnerable Conversations Online

Introduction

In early 2020, The Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship, in partnership with Shikaya and Facing History and Ourselves, piloted a professional development course entitled *Classrooms for Change*. The purpose of the course was to equip teachers with skills to encourage their learners to think critically about history, understand the impact of choices today, and choose to become upstanders in the face of injustice.

The motivation for initiating the course centred on the idea that conversations around power, gender and race in schools, that organically emerge while moving through the curriculum, are not necessarily taking place effectively. Given our belief that classrooms are catalytic spaces, losing the opportunity for these important conversations limits the potential of these spaces.

We also acknowledged the power of education and the influence of teachers to interrupt unhelpful narratives that have been passed down through the generations, making schools an ideal environment to tackle these conversations.

Learners, particularly at adolescent stage, notice injustice and demonstrate enthusiasm for change and so it is clear that a classroom is a space to harness this enthusiasm. Why then are conversations avoided that speak to injustice and questions of identity and power? Teachers may be concerned about creating space for these conversations because they may feel ill-equipped to hold the space well or help support development of learners' understanding of the situation and capacity for nuance.

Added to this challenge, a question central to our course design was 'How do you, as a teacher, hold the space if you feel that a component of your identity makes you feel uncomfortable to engage with the narrative?' – for example, a male teacher tackling a

conversation around the #metoo movement.

Although considerable information about the theory behind these conversations is available, our aim was for a more pragmatic approach to the topic with practical methodology for high school teachers – equipping teachers with real, hands-on ideas to implement.

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic meant a setback to the launch of the course and despite efforts to delay the course in favour of an in-person session, it eventually became clear that the unpredictability of the pandemic, together with the new lockdown rules' restrictions on gatherings meant the course ultimately had to be moved online.

Already, the in-person course had to be sensitively facilitated in order to build trust, so with the shift to an online course, a new question about how to best manage the move became pressing: how do we create an honest, engaging, online reflective space for professional development in a course that was not ever designed to be virtual?

This learning brief will take a closer look at several of the strategies employed in order to make the shift. Some were intentional, and some learned in the process of the shift. The focus here is on the four main, separate strategies used:

1) Creating a dynamic dialogue
2) Getting stuck in
3) Bringing back the humanity
4) Taking it to the classroom

Creating a dynamic dialogue: Format and mode of delivery

Initially, we considered a traditional video call to run the course, with facilitators appearing on screen one at a time from their separate locations. The concerns with this potentially static mode of delivery were that we were already grappling with the content move to an online version of the course, as well as online fatigue among many teachers who were forced to teach online exclusively for parts of the pandemic. Our focus, for those reasons, had to be on how to create an interesting and engaging conversation.

Ultimately, we secured a large space, creating a COVID-compliant environment with the four facilitators in the same room. Having all the contributors together created a sense of connection, camaraderie and trust, which allowed the facilitators to feed off each other in the course of the discussion. We believed that seeing the warmth and interaction between the facilitators would translate through the screen as we sought to create a sense of "us".

In addition, the employment of a videographer meant that the conversation could still be played through a Zoom conference call but the facilitators were able to speak into one camera, while being seen from different angles. The major advantage of this approach was that the conversation appeared more dynamic. Being in the same room and able to respond in real time also helped to prevent unintentional silences, as well as incidences of talking over each other, ensuring a more natural conversation.

Furthermore, in order to facilitate discussions and make allowance for multiple opportunities for the participants to bring their own voice into the room, we made use of smaller online "break-out rooms" of around four people per "room". Not only did this mean that participants were challenged to engage and not 'hide', but we also found that the smaller "break-out rooms" generated a more comfortable, honest space for discussion – perhaps, in some ways, even more so than an in-person discussion.

> *Inspirational - from the content to the facilitation, to the interweaving of stories, practical tools, poetry, journalism, personal testimony and learning from others.*
>
> *- Course Participant*

Getting stuck in: Addressing engagement fatigue

The next consideration was to formulate ways to tackle the very real issue of engagement fatigue. We needed to ensure that teachers felt like individuals and that they felt seen in the sometimes lonely world of online learning. In addition, it was important to manage the anonymity of an online discussion. We wanted to signal that this was different to a standard webinar as teachers would be active participants rather than passive listeners.

In the sign-up process, we wanted to create a sense that we were excited about each teacher's participation and that their absence would be noticed. In a bid to achieve this, each teacher residing in-country was sent an individualised welcome pack. This included a story book (used later in the discussion), headphones (to signal focus), a journal and pens (to indicate engagement, focus and written reflection), and sachets of coffee, tea and biscuits.

The intention was that these would work as ingredients for a focused conversation. The added objective of the welcome pack was to make teachers feel acknowledged and valued, and set the tone for the discussion. To ensure that the course was as accessible as possible, sufficient data was also provided to those participants for whom data costs would have prevented participation. We purposefully did not share the variety of research materials in advance as we hoped the participants would feel that their absence from the course would be a lost opportunity for them.

> *I also like how the past and the present were compared with one another in a collaborative setting. It was great attending a workshop where I wasn't being talked at for hours, but allowed to form part of the learning process.*
>
> *- Course Participant*

Bringing back the humanity: The use of varied storytelling

In the interests of developing a context of connection, humanity and a diversity of voices in our course, we aimed to ensure that the use of multiple and varied materials and interaction opportunities would allow access to a mode of learning that resonated with the different participants. This, in turn, promoted diversity in the way in which the knowledge was being shared. Simply put: there were many opportunities to connect with the content in a way that connected with the participant.

We know that the classroom has the potential to be a good springboard for discussion since young people are likely to be looking to the adults for a reaction.

We felt that this context could therefore authentically demonstrate that a group of people with a differing range of responses to and feelings about an issue, does not negate the opportunity for open conversations about it. Instead, mixed responses can bring needed complexity, depth and nuance to the conversation.

Some of the strategies used to promote humanity and diversity included:

○ The use of poetry:
  – A poem was initially introduced as a way to co-create the rules of engagement for the course.
  – One of the facilitators composed a poem in real time – during the last session – incorporating each participants' closing sentiments.
○ Live readings: The author of a book, which participants had received in their welcome pack, gave live readings. This book was also used as a teaching tool in the course to illustrate the power of storytelling in building empathy, entering the conversation of identity, and bringing content to life.
○ Introduction videos: Videos were sent in beforehand by teachers, which were collated in a video that kickstarted the first day – intentionally centering the teachers' voices and again seeking to continue growing a sense of community.
○ Time to reflect: Journals were sent to participants to give space to those who prefer to process individually and in their own time.
○ Break-out rooms: Participants were able to engage more fully, in smaller groups, with their co-experts in the room: the other teachers. This was a rich opportunity, as the cohort of 105 teachers joined from seven provinces across South Africa, and further afield from Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia, India, Taiwan and Mexico.

Taking it to the classroom: Ready-to use teaching materials

It was imperative to generate teaching materials that would be engaging online, as well as be easily transferable to the classroom environment.

In addition, we needed to establish the relevance of the materials. In the month before the online course was due to begin, one of the sections was reworked to include topical content to use as a case study, e.g. discussing the July unrest relating to the protests and looting in July 2021 in South Africa.

This was chosen as a case study with the expectation that teachers were more likely to engage; as we had become aware of teachers' reports that the learners in their classrooms were looking to the adults in their homes and classrooms to make sense of the events.

In a demonstration of how the materials worked, it was important to show that conversations do not only need to happen when we already have all the answers. The Iceberg model is a way to initiate and open up difficult conversations as a teacher in order to explore, develop nuance, and deepen our understanding of the issues beyond the surface level.

By making use of the Iceberg model, with a focus on the July unrest, the four facilitators demonstrated how to use the model in a conversation that was engaging and real – even still quite raw since some of the teachers were from the area of unrest.

In an example of the Iceberg methodology, participants were asked progressively:

○ What do you see? For example, people protesting, shops being burned down, etc.
○ What is really going on here? What are the trends and patterns we see?
○ What are the underlying structures here? (For example, some policies are mandated in society on how to show up to be accepted.)
○ What assumptions, beliefs and values hold up these structures?

We are aware that often, after professional development journeys, it is difficult to know how to take the material

back to the office, community, or classroom. At the course conclusion, the methodologies and teaching materials used were shared with teachers in an easy-to-use format including blank templates of the Iceberg model and other tools such as identity charts with instruction. The materials and methodologies could be replicated online or in person in order to facilitate similar conversations in the classroom, removing teachers' barriers to initiating these important conversations.
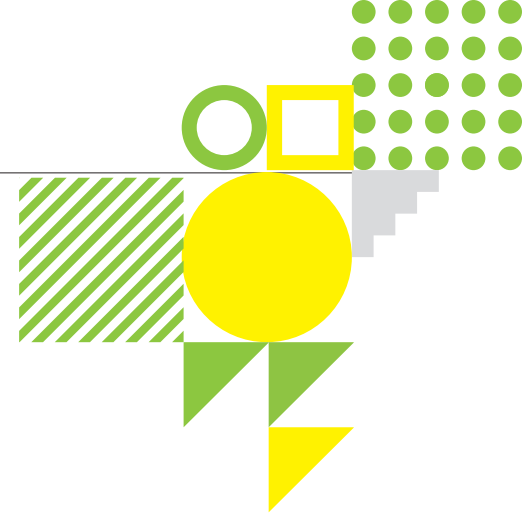

> *The workshop allowed me to connect with various educators providing a multiplicity of perspectives. This is an important approach to change through diversity.*
>
> *- Course Participant*

Conclusion

While initially there had been immense reluctance amongst us as facilitators to take this course online, ultimately we felt gratitude for how the virtual space had served us. The more we had tried to innovate, the more we encountered new challenges, forcing us to innovate further.

The blended mode of the course – with facilitators in person and participants online – was a steep learning curve in terms of technology requirements and available online tools. We experienced some challenges due to technical glitches, however the feedback we received was helpful in understanding what could be improved and how.

Given the gains outlined in this Learning Brief, the attendance of a growing global community, and the opportunity of gathering diverse school environments in the same virtual 'room, we see great benefit in offering another online iteration of Classrooms for Change.

For further information:

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