Creating Pathways for Learners: Value Creation and Social Justice in Action

Maria Guajardo

Abstract

Disruption to the status quo in education erupted from a worldwide pandemic in 2020. COVID-19 pushed university teaching to emergency online teaching. This disruption intersected with a national and international call for racial justice in the US and internationally. Challenges and new learnings emerged as teacher and learners worked to co-create an environment that nurtured the human spirit and promoted learning through the co-construction of knowledge and new pathways. Teaching and learning experiences for this exploratory case study based in Tokyo, Japan, were examined through aspects of two pedagogical approaches: Ikeda's value-creating pedagogy and Freire's critical pedagogy. Questions explored included: How to cultivate a sense of community and belonging in synchronous, online classes at the university level? How to enhance the relevance of course content to contemporary global issues for students from diverse socio-cultural contexts? And, how to guide students towards hope and increased agency while making meaning of class themes during a state of disruption? Featuring the importance of bringing the world into our learning spaces, exploring the possibilities, and connecting the relevance of global issues to student lives, new pathways were presented. The possibilities of deepening a sense of belonging, connection, and purpose were presented with the hope of imbuing an inspired perspective of advancing work in education that allows new transformative learning for both the student and teacher.

Keywords: *Value creation, Social Justice, Belonging, Student Agency, Dialogue, Leadership*

Disruption to the status quo in education erupted from a worldwide pandemic in 2020. COVID-19 pushed university teaching to emergency online teaching and the familiar face-to-face teaching environment disappeared overnight. This disruption intersected with a national and international call for racial justice led by a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, in the US and internationally. While the structural logistics of teaching semester-long courses on Zoom was an immediate challenge, even more important, and less discussed, was how to actualize a transformational educational experience via a computer screen. That is, the nurturing of an engaged learning experience that allows students to develop agency and be co-creators in their learning experience.

Refusing to be stymied in my pursuit of creating a learning environment that engaged students in meaningful and relevant ways with one another and with the course content, led to an exploration of how to bridge what one knows as an educator, to what is needed in a new learning

space. This paper explores how disruption led to creative pathways for actively engaging learners via a Zoom platform at a university in Tokyo, Japan, within English Medium Instruction (EMI) courses. Challenges and new learnings emerged as teacher and learners worked to co-create an environment that nurtured the human spirit and promoted learning through the co-construction of knowledge and new pathways. Racial justice, social change, democracy, and leadership were topics that were directly addressed relative to the seismic shifts occurring in diverse countries.

Pivot to Emergency Online Teaching and Learning

Based in western Tokyo, Japan, I teach at Soka University, a private, liberal arts university with approximately 8,000 students, 10% of whom are international. English Medium Instruction has expanded rapidly throughout Japan, including at my university where five of the eight departments offer EMI courses and degrees. International students and Japanese students take courses delivered in English towards the fulfillment of their degree requirements. The EMI courses, nonetheless, are limited and English-speaking international students often find themselves overrepresented in a smaller number of courses.

In March 2020, there was still much that was unknown about the impact of the pandemic on universities. As the start of the 2020-2021 Academic Year was approaching in April, faculty members at my university were informed that we could anticipate teaching online for approximately three weeks, and then in early May we could expect to come back to campus for face-to-face instruction. As an educator that cherishes the classroom interaction with students, I resolved to make the best of three weeks of online teaching, finding comfort in the brevity of the experience. Then, less than two weeks later we learned that the entire semester would revert to emergency online teaching via the Zoom platform, a completely new experience for me and my students.

Two questions immediately emerged for me. First, how could I develop a level of comfort with the technology involved in synchronous online teaching? Second, how would it be possible to create the teaching and learning experiences that I was accustomed to in face-to-face teaching? Layered upon these two immediate questions was the overlay of the racial justice movement occurring in the United States and worldwide. Two of my courses were directly addressing the themes of racial justice, democracy, leadership, and social change. I felt a sense of responsibility to connect students' current lived experiences with the impact of the pandemic and to engage in critical reflection of these themes.

University Ethos and Mission

The university's mission is to "foster value-creating individuals through rigorous academia, forever committed to its mission of serving peace of the world and happiness of people" (Soka University website, para. 10). The ethos and aim of the university is to nurture "the creative, life-enhancing potential of each student and to inspire students to employ that potential for the greater benefit of humanity" (para. 4). Students, although mindful of the mission, often struggle to make meaning of it in concrete, personal terms. The concept of fostering value-creating individuals through education emerged in the 20th century based on the cumulative scholarship and effort of Makiguchi, Toda, and Ikeda (Gebert & Joffee, 2007; Goulah & Ito, 2012, Goulah, 2021). Ikeda, the founder of Soka University, in his selected writings on education (2021a), and further expanded

in the next section, presents a more comprehensive view of his value-creating approach to education. Given the disruption of the pandemic, could adherence to these humanistic values be operationalized?

Conceptual Approaches

Teaching and learning experiences for this exploratory case study were examined through two complementary pedagogical approaches: Ikeda's value-creating pedagogy, and Freire's critical pedagogy based on social justice principles (Freire, 1998; Ikeda, 1996, Lupinacci, 2021). Three key areas bridge the approaches of these two thought leaders, developing student agency and the centrality of dialogic experiences in enhancing relevance. Additionally, both consider the relational aspect of education as central to teaching and learning. This aspect is connected to a deep care and concern for students that fosters inclusion and a sense of belonging.

Student Agency

Freire shares that the purpose of education as a transformative experience that allows one to contribute to the greater good is guided by wisdom, courage, and action (Horton & Freire, 1990). Students develop a critical awareness of the world based on the concrete experience of their everyday lives (Freire, 1973). Following this Freirean approach, the development of critical reflection serves to transform the learning experience (Guajardo, 2021). "Critical pedagogy opens up a space where students…come to terms with their own power as critically engaged citizens" (Giroux, 2010, p. 717). Freire's critical pedagogy has a central focus on power and agency, preparing learners to lead and manage their own lives, and to lead within their communities (Freire, 1998; Giroux & Bosio, 2021; Torres, 2009). The capacity for self-determination is an outcome of critical pedagogy.

Developing agency and maintaining hope during a time of great uncertainty is a perspective that Ikeda (2017a) conveys in the following, "The same power that moves the universe exists within our lives. Each individual has immense potential, and a great change in the inner dimension of one individual's life has the power to touch others' lives and transform society. Everything begins with us" (p. 3). This is an empowering perspective that mirrors the university's mission in recognizing the potential in students' lives. As Ikeda (2017a) has also shared, "Hope is the force that enables us to take action to make our dreams come true. It has the power to change winter into summer, barrenness to creativity, agony to joy…Most crucial is our determination to continue to believe in the limitless dignity and possibilities of both ourselves and others" (p. 5). The student capacity to develop one's potential can be interpreted as developing agency.

As I thought through my teaching approach, I understood that I needed to connect course content to the students' lived experiences. This was my accustomed approach to teaching, however, now the challenge would be to cultivate these experiences online. As I introduced the class themes, I wanted to make relevant the themes to student experiences in their home countries, which included Australia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Columbia, Indonesia, India, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan. The awareness and skills needed to relate to the 'other' calls for educational engagement to be relevant to the students' lives and this can be done by validating racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural realities and ways of knowing (Caldwell, 2004). Thus, providing a forum for students to connect to their own identities and the identities of others would also be important.

Taking note of being based in Japan, Japan's racialization process of embedded racism (Arudou, 2015) was also shared as a point of contrast. In Japan, racism is difficult to decode as it is embedded in everyday society and normalized. Racism is considered a foreign issue, an experience that occurs in other countries, not in Japan (Kawai, 2015). Kawai notes that racism in Japan has been "obscured and trivialized, as indicated in the Japanese government's refusal to intervene in racism" (p. 41). Arudou shared, "In Japan, you have to 'look' like a 'Japanese' to be perceived as and treated as a citizen by society…[and] where a social majority is so dominant that it seeks to deny the very existence of minorities within it" (p. 316). This perspective of embedded racism was also a topic of discussion.

Dialogic Experience

Ikeda (2001) expounds on the Buddhist approach to dialogue, sharing that, "Genuine dialogue results in the transformation of opposing viewpoints, changing them from wedges that drive people apart into bridges that link them together" (p. 57). Dialogue is a pathway for student learning. For Freire, dialogue is a way of knowing, implies epistemological curiosity, and is a way of approaching the object of knowledge (Freire & Macedo, 1995). "I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social…process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing" (p. 379). The goal of dialogical teaching "involves theorizing about the experiences shared in a dialogue process" (p. 381), encouraging students to become "apprentices in the rigors of exploration" (p. 384). Also, dialogue is a pathway for a way of knowing the self and others (Bradford, 2021; Freire & Macedo, 1995), the dialogic process is not solely conversation and sharing of experiences. Freire posits that it needs to be connected to social praxis, which involves reflection and political action (Freire, 1998). Expanding on Freire's concept of political action, hooks (1994) states that activism takes many kinds of forms; our mere presence together is a form of activism when it involves gathering to co-create pedagogical experiences that are transformational.

Both of my courses had a dialogic approach embedded in the delivery of the course. The dialogic process was incorporated as a means to support and develop student agency. Learning how to engage in transformative dialogue via Zoom would be a new experience for me and my students. Could this be a transformative, value-creating lived experience?

Relational Aspects

In light of the disruption experienced in 2020, how might learning spaces continue to provide the arena for navigating the building of relationships and nurture students in developing a sense of agency for the greater good? Freire stated, "To be human is to engage in relationships with others and with the world" (1973, p. 3). Central to an educational experience is the process of knowing others and connecting to the concept of community (Darder, 2002; Harding & Ikeda, 2013). Thus, the process of knowing is relational. How then could students develop and foster relationships when there was no physical, face-to-face contact?

Ikeda (2014) posited that the individual is central to the work of value creation and entails working with others to solve problems. Ikeda shared, "this is the challenge of creating value--the process by which each of us, in our respective roles and capacities, strives to create that value which is ours alone to realize in order to benefit our fellow citizens, society as a whole and the future" (p. 2).

Students were struggling with motivation and developing a sense of connection to peers. The racial justice theme was also challenging for students, as there was a desire to gloss over or perhaps minimize the discrimination and 'othering' that was occurring in their home countries, and in their own lived experiences.

Author's Positionality

In addition to Ikeda's and Freire's conceptual approaches, it is important to share my educational philosophy that guides my pedagogical approach. Hansen (2007) reflects that an educator's philosophy embraces three elements: values, moral compass, and a generator of ideas for teaching. In the absence of a teaching philosophy, Hansen states that educators rely on unexamined habits and memories. An educational philosophy directs the intentionality of an educator. My educational philosophy is operationalized in guiding principles. These five guiding principles have steered me in face-to-face teaching, and I realized that in 2020, they also undergirded my approach in my Zoom classes. My first principle is the belief that all learning space is sacred. I approach the students with respect and honor the time we share with one another. I wanted to uncover how to respect students on a Zoom platform. Second, engaged learning connects head and heart. I believe that the most meaningful learning occurs when knowledge and content connect to one's personal experiences. As we moved to online teaching, I wondered if I could still connect with my own heart and students' hearts. Third, to discover your truth, your voice and wisdom matter. Each individual's lived experience contributes to the shaping of new knowledge, and I wanted to create a forum on Zoom for student's voice. Fourth, the purpose of education is to become more human. Developing our sense of self, our humanity, our presence in the world is a process of becoming more human. How then could I share my own humanity via Zoom? Fifth, education requires a community. Education is relational and being in a community with others serves as a catalyst for growth. How could I best develop a sense of belonging and community via Zoom?

Research Questions

As I determined to create new pathways during this time of disruption, I was facing challenges in both the delivery of the teaching approach and in creating an engaged learning experience for students. Questions that guided and perplexed me included:

- How to guide students towards hope and increased agency while making meaning of class themes during a state of disruption?
- How to enhance the relevance of course content to contemporary global issues for students from diverse socio-cultural contexts?
- How to cultivate a sense of community and belonging in synchronous, online classes?

Case Study Methodology

The two courses, Democracy and Dialogue, and Global Leadership and Dialogue, each had approximately 30 students, from 12 countries, predominantly from the Global South, and approximately 15-20% were Japanese. Approximately 50% of the international students were unable to return to Japan and were taking classes, synchronously, from their home countries. Both synchronous courses were taught in English, 90 minutes per week, for 14-15 weeks and were designated

as Special Studies in General Education, attracting students from across faculties/departments including international liberal arts, economics, law, and peace studies. Additionally, both courses had a broad focus on racial justice, democracy, global leadership, and social change.

Every class had opportunities for students to engage in small group discussions, dyad dialogues, reflection, connector questions at the start of class, and check-in questions at the end of class. Students kept their cameras on for the most part. If they were experiencing connectivity problems or taking the class in the early hours of the morning in their home country, the camera would usually be off in the large classroom and on in the small break-out groups. Students were asked to reflect at the end of the course on the class experience, specifically on class themes, the use of dialogue and reflection, and relevance of the course content.

A reflexive thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases was utilized to code student reflection essays. Each narrative was read multiple times to generate the initial themes that were then further developed. Braun and Clarke (2021) share, "Within reflexive TA, the coding process is integral to theme development, in the sense that themes are an 'outcome' of these coding and theme development processes, are developed through coding; coding is not…a process for finding evidence for pre-conceptualised themes" (p. 332). Through the thematic analysis process, insights into the student learning experience were named. The findings included: 1. Challenges of online classes, 2. Cultivating community and belonging, 3. Relevance of student lives to global issues, 4. Inspiring hope and agency through leadership, dialogue, and diversity.

The case study narrative and findings also include my teaching reflections based on a journal kept throughout the semester. The use of journaling captures a researcher's reflections, positionality, and identity. "Journal writing expands the scope of such reflection beyond problematic situations…it contains a critical analysis of the (political) context in which actions unfold, the researchers' knowledge, skills, expertise, values, assumptions, and the emotions evoked by the research [and] is a tool for observing, questioning, critiquing, synthesizing, and acting" (Annink, 2016, p. 4-5). For each theme, teaching reflections proceed student reflections.

Findings

The findings are guided by the thematic analysis that resulted in four themes. Challenges experienced due to online teaching and learning were shared by all. Second, the work of cultivating community and belonging was facilitated through sustained small groups that proved pivotal for building relationships. Third, connecting student lived experiences to global issues enhanced relevance of course content. Fourth, student agency was linked to leadership, dialogue, and diversity, resulting in a feeling of hopefulness despite the ongoing challenges.

1. Challenges of Online Classes

Teacher Reflection

As someone who does not consider herself tech-savvy, the thought of teaching my courses on Zoom caused anxiety and nightmares. I worried if I would be able to do the basic functions of getting students into class via Zoom. I watched multiple videos and webinars on how to teach online and these created more angst. Finally, one video of a professor experienced in synchronous online teaching dissolved my worries. This individual shared that keeping the process simple worked best. As a result of his words, I imagined that all my students were seated in the front row

of my classroom. I used the Chat function extensively and popped into the breakout rooms as students met in their small discussion groups. I felt like we were all learning together how to navigate through the technology and how to express ourselves on a computer screen.

Student Reflections

Students expressed the challenges of shifting to an online format. Regardless of whether they were in their home countries or on campus in the dormitory, the challenge of taking classes online was evident, impacting motivation, a sense of loneliness, and a disconnection to the university experience. Rodriguez (2021) shared, "the pandemic has caused significant grief, loss and denial of peer and familial interactions, particularly for our most marginalized communities" (para. 1). As exemplified in their reflections, students questioned whether the course content could be taught online, shared their challenges moving to an online format, and struggles dealing with COVID-19.

> *It was difficult to believe that a class this profound was going to be conducted online but nevertheless, I am very grateful that each of us had the same heart to make efforts in getting as much of the full experience of taking this class.*

> *This semester has been challenging for me…As I am a passive learner, the class environment is what motivates me…Due to all classes being conducted remotely from home it has been a real challenge for me to develop my academic conscience and focus during class.*

> *This semester was probably the most challenging given the current circumstances and especially with having to get used to the new system of classes being online. I feel that this class was a sort of escape from the hardships…we were able to address the things that are occurring and be able to have a safe space to discuss them.*

> *When my family tested covid positive and I was unable to participate in the midterm assignment I felt really bad…I had forgotten about the meeting and at night saw the group chat where my mates had sent concerned messages inquiring about my wellbeing.*

Students shared the challenges of taking classes online. I also learned of family challenges as students voluntarily shared when family members became ill or passed away due to the COVID-19 virus. Creating a safe space and a sense of community then became particularly salient. My focus aligned with the approach recommended by Rodriguez (2021), "We need to focus not just on instructional strategies but also on relationships. We should focus on empathy, flexibility, respect and human connection. We should listen to students' voices and to their silences" (para. 3).

> *To be a good leader you have to be empathetic…Empathy is a quality that a leader should possess to be kind to the people around them and understand that each person is unique and has their limitations.*

Students recognized the need for empathy during these disruptive times and acknowledged the need to also develop empathy.

2. Cultivating a Sense of Community and Belonging

Teacher Reflection

Small things matter. As the first Zoom class began, I did what came naturally, which was to greet every student by name as they appeared on the screen. This was almost instinctual. It was only later that I learned from my students that this was one of the few Zoom classes where their presence was acknowledged. In addition to calling them by name, I would make a point of commenting on something specific to them from the last class or from a comment in the class platform for assignments. I also organized them into small groups, making the groups as diverse as possible by gender, country of origin, area of study. We collectively decided to call these small groups, tribes, reflecting a spirit of community as espoused by Junger (2016). Junger posits that we can learn from tribal societies about loyalty and belonging and taking responsibility for one another. Students shared that this word reflected a sense of community and belonging. They met in their tribes during every class to reflect on discussion questions. The tribes remained intact in one class for the entire semester, and in another class for half of the semester and then new tribes were formed. In both cases, students spoke to the value of meeting in the same small group for 7 or 15 weeks. As a tribe they had group projects to complete throughout the semester; projects that ranged from planning a movement to composing a group poem. Student interactions in their tribes allowed for bridging to occur. Heydemann and powell (2020, p. 4) share, "bridging helps us turn outward to form connections and partnerships between dissimilar individuals and groups…Bridging thus increases empathy and acceptance of diverse peoples, values, and beliefs while giving us greater access to different parts of ourselves."

Student Reflections

Students appreciated the connection to one another via their tribes. They formed friendships, and at times considered their tribes a lifeline to the university community. They felt loved and cared for in their small groups. A sense of belonging allowed them to feel safe, broaden their perspectives and build friendships. Freire shares that the elements of trust and respect are central to a learning experience (Horton & Freire, 1990). Student reflections attest to the sense of belonging that emerged, based on trust and respect.

> *I appreciate all the classmates, and especially tribe members who taught me different perspectives and the joy of learning, connection, and having a dialogue…I am proud to say that we creatively strengthened the bonds online! I received so much love in this class.*

> *Despite the physical distance, we have been able to connect straight away, creating wonderful bonds, that I would have believed impossible amidst all my doubts and prejudices regarding any online activity. The relationship and warm atmosphere…made me rethink my ideas [that] it is impossible to develop true friendships if you only speak through a screen.*

> *In this class, I felt a sense of belonging, which I do not feel in other classes. Even on the screen, I could strongly feel individuals' energy, love, passion, and emotions.*

Guajardo—Creating Pathways for Learners

Participating in a tribe community contributed to a sense of belonging, a quality found to mitigate adversity and contribute to a sense of well-being (Walton & Cohen, 2011). The opportunity to develop friendships is also central to social change. As Ikeda (2017b) notes, "It is my confident expectation that friendship among youth will powerfully turn back the sullied currents of divisiveness and give birth to a vibrant culture of peace based on profound respect for diversity" (para. 13). Student comments below specifically describe the development of friendships.

> *This whole concept of being a member of a tribe is so heartwarming to me because it was through this that I was able to gain new friends and to get a chance to hear their personal takes on what we read and dig deeper into the values they upheld.*

> *I had an amazing tribe experience. Every member in my tribe was extremely open from both their minds and hearts, and I could express myself without hesitation. Being in this tribe...gave me the courage to open my heart and to gain more confidence in myself. The tribe members created such an environment where we all felt safe...we built a strong bond of friendship through mutual understanding and trust.*

3. Relevance of Student Lives to Global Issues

Teacher Reflection

Both Ikeda and Freire speak to the importance of the current lived moment and the need to connect and make relevant daily experiences. Ikeda (2017b) elaborates, "Education gives rise to the actions and activities that shape the direction of society over time…can foster action and solidarity, enabling young people to bring forth their full potential and increasing momentum for global change" (p. 2). The centrality of educational relevance, couched in critical reflection and praxis, also connects to Freire's educational philosophy (Freire, 1973). Freire's (1994) perspective on the importance of learning to read the word and read the world is demonstrated in how students build community with one another, and then challenge one another to bridge their cultural differences.

For myself, as an educator, to bring forth the relevance and connection for students meant disturbing and/or illuminating student perspectives. As Freire noted, conflict is the midwife of consciousness, and yet this is not ever separate from a deep love for one's students (Horton & Freire, 1990). I challenged students to connect to and make meaning of the disruption they were experiencing and observing, both in their respective countries and worldwide.

Class exercises utilized to engage learners and build community included Dialogic Work, Co-Creating Activities, and Problem-solving Tribe Projects. Each presented the depth of possibility of building trust, friendship, agency, and a heightened responsibility to engage as a change-maker. Dialogic work included opportunities to engage in a structured dialogue with one classmate, initially within tribe and then later in the semester across tribes. A question or prompt related to the class content would focus the individual sharing. Co-creating activities involved exercises where students were tasked with writing an assignment as a tribe, for example, a poem based on the weekly class theme or a declarative statement of beliefs and ideals. Problem-solving Tribe

Projects were mid-term or final projects completed collaboratively with their Tribe mates. Examples of these projects included designing a social movement or conducting a 60-minute dialogue on a global issue, presenting diverse views.

Student Reflections

Through an enhanced awareness, students shared how they developed a global mindset for dealing with global issues as detailed in their reflections below.

> *With the tools and insight that this course gave me on dialogue, democracy, and the various themes that we saw every day, we opened our hearts and made connections to one another, even when we were miles away from each other…each little step will take us to the fundamental change of society were everyone can be truly free, where we can truly live democracy and where our shared humanity transcends our differences.*

> *I believe the process of "learning" is not just about studying knowledge from textbooks…but to apply what we have learned into our life, so that our learning process has meaning…*

> *Regarding the content of the class…I was surprised by how related it is to the current situation and the fact that it is not only what is happening in the United States but also in many countries including my home country… it allowed me to have a better understanding of the history of my family when we talked about the idea of community, its connectedness to nature and to history.*

> *The content of this class I found applicable with the current issues, and it provided perspective in helping me to better understand…racial inequality…about the deep-rooted issue of racial injustice…to understand the history and the importance of racial equality.*

These student reflections showcase the bridging that occurred between current global challenges and connections to their lived experiences. This bridging concept is captured by Freire as he shares that teaching and learning demand critical reflection, not just a transmitting of knowledge (Horton & Freire, 1990; Bajaj & Vlad, 2018). The processes of knowing and growing are inextricably linked.

4. Student Agency linked to Leadership, Dialogue, and Diversity

Teacher Reflection

By the fourth week of classes I wrote in my journal, "I was so touched by how they engaged in class, that after class I cried…I was moved by how sincerely students connected to the dilemmas and challenges posed. I feel like my students are being stretched to consider other possibilities, stretched to consider the challenge of having ideals like peace, nonviolence, democracy, and justice." I sensed that students were seeking answers. As Ikeda (2021b) shared, "Nevertheless, even as the dark clouds of this crisis continue to shroud the world, progress in efforts to build a global society committed to peace and humane values has not halted" (para. 4). My students had not

halted in their efforts to want to contribute to social change. Freire (1994) also posits that "There is no change without dreams, as there is no dream without hope" (p. 91). Hope and the sense of agency emerged in both classes. I pushed students to reflect and imagine what was possible, in terms of addressing global issues, locally.

Student Reflections

The students' expression of hope resonates with Ikeda's guiding ethos of hope and joy (Bogen, 2021). These qualities are not to be added into programs, rather they are central to the learning experience. Bogen reflects that the "core task of an educator is to light a spark in students…one that encourages them to follow their interests, trust their voice and believe in their ability to realize their full potential" (p. 145). The reflections below capture this sense of hope and agency.

> I do not see any better time to have taken this class. Our world right now is going through one of the hardest challenges…and still we are learning about hope and about community. We see many people losing hope. At one point, I was losing hope… I realized I could not lose hope…Our earth and our society depend on our generation, and we have a great role to play.

> I truly felt that this class prioritizes the students, especially their personal growth…It was filled with both great opportunities and difficult challenges…it felt more like a journey of self-exploration whilst tackling real-life problems that humanity faces. It allowed me to connect my small, tiny self to the big, vast world and opened my eyes to how all of us, as individuals, have the ability and capacity to contribute to change in the world…this class awakened me to reanalyze the whole meaning and importance of my role in society again.

> The concept of looking at my future as a blue and open ocean where I can explore many unexpected opportunities with excitement, rather than a wall or mountain that I need to overcome, was revolutionary…I could [re]fuel with courage and hope to continue this journey with a more positive mindset.

One student captured her learning process in terms of joy.

> [In] this class, I found the process of understanding others, and gaining wisdom through social engagement, a most wondrous and mysterious journey of joyful self-realization.

Student reflections strongly supported their sense of agency through three key concepts: leadership, the importance of dialogue, and the value of diversity.

Embracing Leadership

The concept of leadership was often tied directly to the concept of student agency. Ikeda (2017a) shared, "Education gives rise to the actions and activities that shape the direction of society…[and] can foster action and solidarity, enabling young people to bring forth their full potential

and increasing momentum for global change" (p. 5). Student reflections captured a sense of ownership of their own leadership capacity and hopeful expectations towards social change.

> *The hardest part to me is fully believing in myself as a leader of global peace. This class has showed me that it is "the heart that is most important." Without a cause that resonates with people's heart, without dialogue, others would not choose to join a social movement.*

> *It was in this class that I had laughed, cried, and felt many different emotions…but the most important of all was that I felt hope…and I will continue hoping that a peaceful and just world can be attained through our own actions as global citizens.*

> *I've realized that the fundamental qualities of a global leader are trained and not inherent. We are all capable of awakening dormant characteristics lurking inside of us. I feel more empowered knowing this and emboldened to throw myself into uncomfortable situations for the benefit of others.*

Student reflections capture the sense of agency connected to their own identity and understanding of leadership that was being nurtured and developed. Feeling empowered and emboldened, students recognized their own sense of agency in contributing to their own role as leaders.

The Role of Dialogue

Students practiced a structured approach to dialogue where they learned to listen to understand and speak their truth. Students were reminded that conversational exchange is an act of verbal ping pong and does not necessarily reflect dialogue. Dialogic experiences in class strive to approach Ikeda's views of dialogue as an experience that is transformative for both parties, with the goal of bringing out the best in oneself and others (Urbain, 2018). These reflections capture the relationship between dialogic learning and student agency (Bajaj & Vlad, 2018). Dialogue created opportunities for students to imagine a new reality.

> *I think we always achieved true dialogue…I experienced a microcosm of the diverse society that we all aspire to, one without judgment, fear and filled with warm company which just made us wish to have one more minute together to share a little more.*

> *We managed to dialogue in all classes…at times we disagreed but we always tried to understand the other side, thus practicing our Active Listening, which we managed to develop a lot during this semester.*

> *The discussions we held in class trained me to become an active listener. They cultivated in me a sense of compassion…I'm able to be more genuine with who I am rather than having to portray a certain image of myself…Being vulnerable has completely changed the dynamic of my dialogues. Dialogues feel rawer as if my being has been stripped down to nothing but its core without a blanket of insecurity.*

Valuing Diversity

As students approached the diversity of demographics and perspectives in class, they operationalized McDowell's (2018) conceptualization of diversity. "Demographic complexity speaks to the interconnection among people, even in the face of their differences" (p. 217). Students shared how these diverse perspectives were new to them, and at the same time welcomed.

> *All of us come from different parts of the world and speak different languages and we have a variety of ages in the group, from 20 to 33…we are able to come together as a team and have such a strong and deep dialogue… our differences in background bring more value to our dialogue because each of us could share our own perspective and experience.*

> *We discussed many topics related to diversity…such as the Black Lives Matter movement, which, especially in the United States, has redefined workplace diversity and brought to light the importance of inclusion and diverse representation in our society.*

> *During our final dialogue one of the questions redirected us to our cultural roots and we spoke about how culture is important for us to be socially accepted into our society…The class discussions and weekly questions were answered based on what our culture teaches us, and at the same time our cultural underpinnings were also challenged.*

Discussion

This paper explored how the disruption of a pandemic and the emergency move to online learning led to an opportunity to discover creative pathways for actively engaging learners. Three research questions were examined through the conceptual lens of Ikeda and Freire's approaches. First, students experienced a sense of community and belonging in synchronous, online classes. The value of forming small groups that sustained interaction throughout the semester served to create connections amongst students. These small groups served to both develop friendships as well as safe spaces to explore differences, and topics of injustice and oppression. During a time of physical distancing, students were also experiencing social distancing. A dialogic approach to these classes strengthened bonds and served to close the gap of distance. The stronger the bonds, the more the gap was minimized. Second, course content and the impact of the pandemic and the international exposure of racial injustice were intertwined in weekly critical reflections, challenging students to explore and make relevant the themes of racial justice, social change, democracy, and leadership. Through critical reflection, students bridged global issues to their diverse sociocultural contexts. Third, students embraced hopeful perspectives and increased agency about their roles in the world, mirroring the university's ethos of contributing to the greater good, even during a state of disruption. Perspectives and growth experiences related to leadership, dialogue, and diversity were also central to students' learning.

Transformation and the role as active participants, as espoused by Freire and Ikeda, illuminates the possibilities of increased agency in facing challenges in a learning environment, and emerging intact, with a deeper connection to heart. My own reflective process of teaching and learning was shared with the purpose of outlining possible applications and implications of this work for engaged learning and building community. Featuring the importance of bringing the world into our learning spaces, exploring the possibilities, and connecting the relevance of global issues to student lives, new pathways were presented.

Conclusion

A worldwide pandemic in 2020, COVID-19, disrupted education and pushed university teaching to emergency online teaching. Challenges and new learnings emerged as teacher and learners worked to co-create an environment that nurtured the human spirit and promoted learning through the co-construction of knowledge and new pathways. Teaching and learning experiences for this exploratory case study based in Tokyo, Japan, were examined through aspects of two pedagogical approaches: Ikeda's value-creating pedagogy and Freire's critical pedagogy. Questions explored included: How to cultivate a sense of community and belonging in synchronous, online classes at the university level? How to enhance the relevance of course content to contemporary global issues for students from diverse socio-cultural contexts? How to guide students towards hope and increased agency while making meaning of class themes during a state of disruption? A reflective thematic analysis resulted in four themes: 1. Challenges experienced due to online teaching/learning, 2. Cultivating community and belonging pivotal for building relationships; 3. Connecting student lived experiences to global issues enhanced relevance of course content; and 4. Student agency was linked to leadership, dialogue, and diversity, resulting in a feeling of hopefulness despite the ongoing challenges. The possibilities of deepening a sense of belonging, connection, and purpose were presented with the hope of imbuing an inspired perspective of advancing work in education that allows new transformative learning for both the student and teacher.

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