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The ‘Soft Power’ of In-Class Reflection: A Transformative Experience

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Introduction

This paper is based on active in-classroom experimentation with the notions of reflection, student empowerment, and team-based learning, and the introduction of the concept of ‘soft power’ in relation to a Continuous Reflection Model in the classroom. Reflection was examined as a cultivated and voluntarily embraced tool for personal and professional growth. As well, the concept of an “empowered classroom” was introduced. By utilizing data collection, observations, and testimonials from four upper-level Modern History courses over the course of two academic years, the practice was designed and repeatedly iterated to assess the ways in which the ‘soft power’ of continuous reflective practices impacts students’ habits of mind, influences their intellectual capacity, and tests their societal attitudes and values. All four courses were equal in their contextual complexity, the reading loads and assessment schemes, as well as their relevance to prominent global issues. The findings

described in this paper were enacted to contribute to the methodology of active learning, while expanding the notion of a flipped classroom and introducing the “empowered classroom” model.

Description of the Practice

The teaching practice under examination was based on four principles including intentionality, collaboration, design-thinking, and risk-taking. The Continuous Reflection Model was co-designed by Instructor and students and integrated throughout each semester in a dynamic way, while avoiding repetitions and reflection fatigue. The underlying methodology of the model was centered around reflecting on both the content and the process of learning, both individually and collaboratively. The design of a model in which reflection can organically flourish was based first and foremost on creating a social network of learners built on inter-personal relationships and trust. As well, the instructor generated additional interest in course content by construc-

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tively critiquing existing scholarship, incentivising student undergraduate research, facilitating peer-mentor academic presentations by the courses' alumni and providing self-assessment opportunities to students to examine their personal learning goals and address knowledge gaps in the area under study. These activities resulted in the formation of learning communities based on mindfulness, mutual and self-respect, and peer-to-peer and peer-to-instructor collegiality.

On average, by the middle of all semesters under examination, a functioning “empowered classroom” emerged. Student groups in all four courses actively engaged in curriculum design. A significant portion of the assessment scheme was dedicated to teamwork, which included seminar co-facilitations, and student-proposed reflective practices. The collaboration flowed between in-class and out-of-classroom learning spaces, and utilized individual students' leadership skills, technical abilities, prior learning, and versatile disciplinary backgrounds. These all became contributing factors to completing assignments and meeting the course and program learning outcomes. The process of continuous reflection accompanied all of these collaborative efforts and manifested itself in a variety of forms. These included written, verbal, and non-verbal reflections, as well as optional take-home reflections that a majority of learners voluntarily completed. Reflection was also built into most of the student-driven gamified portion of the curriculum and gradually became a natural attribute of all weekly seminars.

As a result of this experimental approach, the number of assignments

originally designed per course was exceeded by 25% on average. The intentionality and collaboration principles of the teaching practice under examination were strengthened by the application of the principles of design-thinking and risk-taking. The students were prepared and encouraged to think experimentally and experientially, and to take informed risks in student-driven activities, show flexibility and responsiveness, as well as challenge traditional in-classroom power hierarchies. This contributed directly to the creation of an “empowered classroom” in which students and instructor become partners in teaching and learning. The instructor's role as a sole content provider decreased, whereas their role as a mentor-facilitator increased significantly.

Outcomes and Impacts

The outcomes of implementing this new model in the four aforementioned classes exceeded the instructor's original expectations and can be divided into several categories.

First, on the administrative side, the model assured high levels of student retention and a higher average GPA across all four courses. Relatedly, all four courses became an attractive recruitment feature for the academic program. Second, the model cultivated a number of transferable skills, critical not only for the successful completion of an academic degree but corresponding to the most sought-after employment skills. These include creativity, critical thinking, coordinating with others, emotional intelligence, cognitive flexibility, and others. Third, the new practice cultivated mindfulness and inclusivity and resulted in an increased level of cross-cultural

awareness, competency and dialogue. It extended beyond academic life and into social life contributing to the formation of long-lasting friendships and relationships among peers. The “empowered classroom” also demonstrated a direct correlation between peer mentorship and student success.

In conclusion, students who had previously felt largely disengaged from an active learning process or had not fully experienced belonging or personal agency within the post-secondary environment boosted their confidence and ability to learn and showcase their knowledge through this model. Although these outcomes were achieved, the model was proven among upper-level courses and could be partially dependent on the audience in a given class. In this context, learners underwent a transformative experience and reaffirmed the value of high impact practices in Experiential Learning.

Implications and Next Steps

This practice is geared towards student self-empowerment and the cultivation of life-long learning and transferable skills, thus influencing a clarification of career goals. It is intended to be scaled up and implemented in all upper-level courses taught by the Instructor over the next three years and beyond, and well as shared across the institution as an innovative practice in the area of active learning, and high impact practices in Experiential Learning. This will be accomplished by developing a pre-recorded workshop and presentation materials which will then be disseminated broadly. As well, student testimonials will be continuously collected after each class taught according to the

Continuous Reflection Model and the concept of the “empowered classroom” in order to improve quality, expand on data collection, and continue innovation within the curriculum design. ■