

Queering CPE in Central Pennsylvania: An Embodied Womanist Approach to Learning

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We must start with social location. I am aware that my social location matters in the context of my role in the environment where I am teaching. I am a Black, masculine-presenting, queer woman in Central Pennsylvania teaching in a predominately White healthcare institution.² The institution is located in the middle of a cornfield. It's centered in rural America. At Penn State Health, we predominantly serve Amish and Mennonite communities as well as persons from surrounding cities such as Philadelphia and Baltimore.

What made me aware that my location would matter is my drive to work. I noticed Confederate flags on pickup trucks, Trump flags flying, and a slogan that was centered on a confederate flag read, "It's not a flag it's my heritage." These signs are historic signs of "White supremacy" that made me aware that being a Black, queer woman would not be fully accepted in this place. However, I was led by the Spirit of the womanist tradition and womanist survival to believe that God will "make a way out of no way."¹

As a person on the margins, I have learned several things from supervising for two years in this landscape. (1) Liberation theology is a new concept for most of our recruited students. (2) Relational cultural theory is essential for helping students establish connections with diverse persons. (3) Teaching students to think independently, outside of "groupthink," is important for forming their pastoral identity. (4) Rural America is located on the margins as it relates to liberal thinking in my experience.

For example, my European-descendant student Eden, who represents the Swedenborgian tradition, made it a part of her learning goal to learn more about serving diverse faith needs because the classroom and the clinical environment would be a new experience for her of engaging with others' different belief systems. Eden was a stay-at-home mom who had entered the clinical pastoral education (CPE) learning environment as a way to find employment to provide for her family.

I am aware that when my students come into the classroom, they are not leaving

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Queer, as I define it, is pushing beyond the limitations of heteronormativity by radically nurturing self and a loving community. To be queer is to interact with the differences of human nature through a conscious practice of normalization, empathy, social action, and spiritual renewal.

their identities at the door. Their identities and their religious and social-political understanding are coming inside of the classroom with them. Juanita Bailey, a writer on adult education, shares that adults bring their worldview into the classroom. I understand that these identities are not isolated from the student but are a part of the student learner. I must understand the identities that inform my students to invite them to explore their theological understanding of working with patients. I posit that before we invite students to form their pastoral identity, they must understand their own identities and differences.

My philosophy of education centers on understanding each of my student's identities and inviting them to do the work of understanding their own identity. Students' engagement with their differences is parallel to their clinical work with patients. I am aware that some students will come to the learning environment conscious of how their differences build connections or disconnections with others. However, there will be some who are unconscious of how their differences inform their identity or how their differences relate to others. We must teach students to be aware of the differences in adult learning because their worldview impacts how the student sees the patient and how the patient sees the student. We as chaplains do not enter the room blindly; we enter the room with our ideas and our worldview. It is my goal that my students seek to understand the patient's worldview and explore it as a way to build relationships and support the patient and their needs.

And so, my theory of education invites us to explore these worldviews through the approach of engaged pedagogy, which is a method of collaborative learning articulated by bell hooks. bell hooks along with Paulo Freire deconstructs the hegemony in the classroom. Engaged pedagogy invites students and teachers to be participants in the learning environment. It creates a shared learning environment. In adult education, everyone is an expert. Students are experts on themselves, their influences, and their culture. My role as an educator is to come alongside them, not to be a representative of the system but to be an ally who is aiding them in their development as adult learners. I do not have all the power in the room. My role is to invite my students to see the illumination and the power within themselves.

I want to learn and connect with my students, and how I do this is by engaging and meeting them with empathy and by understanding the things that are important to them in their learning process, such as learning goals. I want to know what they want to learn. Collaborative learning and engaged pedagogy allow space for experiential learning. This allows the student and teacher to share and explore the ontological and epistemological ways of knowing and being. These explorations deconstruct the "banking system"ⁱⁱ of education and allow for a freer learning environment. This approach to learning is influenced by many liberationist scholars and theologians. Tracy Ollis writes in her article "Activism, Reflection and Paulo Freire—An Embodied

Pedagogy” that Freire believed that education is political, and that education cannot be removed from the current context of our social and political realities.ⁱⁱⁱ

A freer classroom invites the student to explore their political, social, and theological way of knowing and being without judgment or the process of retaining information. This way of learning allows the student to explore their innate way of being and knowing, which will influence how they treat and assess patients’ needs at the bedside.

How my students engage in this type of learning is by “recalling their own stories.”^{iv} The students begin exploring their learning through narration by sharing their autobiography and by clinical verbatims, individual supervision, and group processing.

I quickly discovered that most of my students had not heard of liberation theology and that engaged pedagogy seemed threatening to some. I also found that learning from a Black woman in authority was perceived as risky behavior by some students because they had never had a Black woman educator. This was an inherently queer concept—to have a Black woman educator teaching in the area. I am the first Black educator to teach at Penn State Health Hershey in the CPE department.

Due to White supremacy, our classrooms in American society have been inundated with banking styles of learning, and this has narrowed the gaze of learning for many individuals. I have noticed much of this conceptualized thinking within the boomer generation, which I demonstrate one example later in this paper.

Trauma-informed care has been instrumental in unpacking anxiety and trauma in the classroom. I have learned that for some students entering a classroom that is multicultural, multireligious, and multi-ethnic can be extremely stressful and scary. I am aware that the CPE group experience can recapitulate family groups and society as a whole. Therefore, I am conscious of creating an educational environment where people feel safe to engage and learn. Incorporating trauma-informed care into my theories was imperative because it enabled me to evaluate when students are responding to trauma or being triggered in the learning environment.

For example, Gloria was the only African American woman in a group composed of four other White American individuals from the following generations: baby boomers, millennials, and Generation Z. She mentioned while sharing her narrative with her peer group that she was the first African American woman to integrate her elementary school system in her hometown of Allentown, Pennsylvania, an experience that appeared to be a painful part of her story. She cried retelling the story to her peers. As the group progressed, I observed Gloria being highly anxious. She sometimes would demonstrate the trauma response by fawning when having to present.^v She would often allow her peers to go first. She would talk down about her work and would affirm her peers’ work over her own. In supervision, I asked Gloria what she was aware of concerning the group dynamics. She was able to articulate that

she was the only Black woman, and she mentioned how, in most of her professional career, she's been the "token." She talked about how she doesn't always feel safe. I shared with her that I observed her moving into people-pleasing in the group. She shared that she was not always aware that she was doing it. I asked her to reflect on what she needed from her peers to feel safe with the group so that she would not feel the need to people-please. She seemed to appreciate the feedback, and I later observed Gloria making her needs known more often to her peers and the department.

At the end of the unit, I was conversing with Gloria about our supervisory relationship. She revealed she felt scared of my authority, which left me befuddled. I was befuddled because she had never shared this dynamic with me, and as a young educator, I didn't notice how people-pleasing was showing up in her relationship with me. I thought that Gloria's and my shared connection of race and gender would be enough to sustain our pastoral relationship. However, I wasn't aware of how my age and role would create conflict. I am a young person in authority, and this nuance is also queer. This encounter made me more aware of the need to ask students what was necessary to unpack our teacher-to-student relationship. My fear of challenging authority presented itself with my educators in every phase of my CPE training experience, which of course parallels my teaching experience with my students. Unpacking one's social location is essential to remaining in a relationship with one's students.

Unpacking is a necessary part of assessing what adults know and need to know in the CPE process. My previous theories had informed me that students' lived experiences contributed to their behavior in the learning environment.^{vi} In the past year, I have been engaging my theory with understanding how systems influence students' way of being in the classroom and the patient's room.^{vii} Through working with students to unpack belief systems or systems that hinder students' ability to grow, I have learned that much of the classroom experience is about unlearning to learn.^{viii} This realization led me to discover how a person's thinking can impact a person's ability to learn. I became aware that, to become healthy professional chaplains, my students must learn to accept and/or embrace those shadow traits that prevent them from living into their healthy selves. I also realized that not many adults have time to reflect on how and where they have learned to show up in the world. Learning about their shadows is a key part of development for adults who are seeking to be professionals in a pluralistic system like a hospital.

The CPE learning environment gives adults time to learn, reflect, and act. The pandemic made it clear that chaplains are essential workers who must learn how to engage the global world through a critical lens. I have learned that not all adults are taught how to think critically, and this has been a huge growth in my learning as an educator. Since passing my associate committee, I have added trauma-informed care,

systems-centered theory, and Bowen family systems theory to my womanist and liberation theology. Systems-Centered Group Theory by Yvonne Agazarian, "Trauma Informed Care" by Peter Levine, and *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory* by Roberta M. Gilbert have helped me uncover and break up patterns that limit growth.^{ix} Drawing on systems-centered theory, I borrow from Agazarian the idea of understanding roles, goals, and context in a larger system. As a new educator in the Penn State system, I recognized that it was important to establish boundaries concerning my role and my students' role. I implemented a didactic that I now teach during orientation to explain to the students the role of each member of our department. I added this to my didactic orientation after a student was told by a staff chaplain when he was leaving that she would inherit his position. Unfortunately, I was unaware that the student had been told this until she was turned down for the position and was disgruntled after not receiving the job.

This led me to unpack for students how the hospital system leadership functions so that they can understand who holds the power to make decisions within the system. The specifics of operational components within the hospital are not always obvious to adults who relate authority to a prescribed gender, race, and class. For example, the social location of the student expecting to be hired was a White Euro-American woman in her mid-fifties from the Swedenborgian religion and the staff chaplain was a mid-fifties White Euro-American man who had been in his position of leadership for five years. The student presumed that the staff chaplain had more authority than I did and relied more on his words than on my authority and role within the department. The student conversed with the director about her disappointment in not receiving the position due to the encouragement and the affirmation from the staff chaplain that she would inherit his role when he left. This encounter led me to check in with students over the semester about how they were interacting with the people in different roles in the hospital and how it intercepted (or did not intercept) with their role.

I have used Bowen's family systems theory to show students how anxiety travels through the group and the larger hospital system. Also, it is a resource for demonstrating to students how to be more self-differentiated. Carl Jung suggests that to help others one must know the self.^x This year, I had a student, Mark, who parroted his peers and educator in most of his comments. I assessed that this was a way he was learning new topics, for parroting others is a style of learning. I was aware of his religious and political differences as the only conservative believer in the group. I was curious about what he needed to feel comfortable to voice his differences.

As the unit progressed, I assessed that this student was still developing his own theological beliefs. Well, I am aware that students need to know their own beliefs to demonstrate the outcomes in Level 2.^{xi} In supervision, I would ask Mark what his theological beliefs were, and he would either say he did not know, or he needed more time to figure it out. I began to learn from other members of the group that he was

concerned about issues related to affirmative action, and I heard from his African American peer that he “mistakenly” had called her a negro instead of Black. I assessed that Mark had used this term unconsciously with his peer. When I explored this in supervision, he couldn’t recall the encounter. He later admitted that he had said this, after talking about it with his peer. When we explored this, he shared that he needed to learn more about the impact of race. He said he had added James Cone to his reading to learn more about Black liberation theology. What I am aware of, given today’s Republican majority, is that Black identity isn’t valued in today’s educational environment.

In the group, I started to teach Bowen’s concept of the basic self, which states that the basic self is guided by well-developed principles discovered through the best thinking based on logic and fact that one can achieve.^{xii} I observed that after Mark began to learn about the concept of the basic self and groupthink, he began to speak more about his conservative upbringing and how he was currently self-differentiating from these views. I experienced Mark becoming more congruent with his theological beliefs and his pastoral identity. Relational cultural theory was another theory I used to supervise and remain in a relationship with Mark. What Mark and I shared in common is that we were both born to parents who were substance abusers. I observed Mark’s patient encounters through the lens of relational cultural theory. He learned how to relate to others by finding common interests. He articulated how he had learned how to build connections by starting with a common interest such as a Pepsi-Cola. Mark often referred to how Pepsi-Cola enabled him to connect with a patient who was different from him in age and gender.

In conclusion, we must start with social location. Bowen’s theory, systems-centered theory, trauma-informed care, liberation theology, and relational cultural theory helped to bring balance to me and gave me a more well-rounded view of how students learn and think. It has been imperative for me to use these theories as a person on the margins. They ultimately help me assess the stumbling blocks, which can be system-related or embodied through lived experiences, that hinder a person’s ability to be relational due to differences. What has helped me with students the most is knowing that it will take time for students to unpack the barriers that create disconnections. Carl Jung states that “self-improvement is actualized by a person’s becoming aware of the realities of one’s situation.^{xiii}” I know that my students must process their social locations to articulate how their care encounters intersect with their own narrative (ACPE Level 1a outcome).

NOTES

ⁱⁱ Paulo Freire (1968) introduced the ‘banking’ concept of education whereby he equated teachers with bank clerks and saw them as ‘depositing’ information into students rather than drawing out knowledge from individual students or creating inquisitive beings with a thirst for knowledge. Uvanney Maylor, “Key Pedagogic Thinkers: Paulo Freire,” *Journal of Pedagogic Development* 2, no. 3 (2012),

<https://www.beds.ac.uk/jpd/journal-of-pedagogic-development-volume-2-issue-3/key-pedagogic-thinkers-paulo-freire/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tracey Ollis , “Activism, Reflection and Paulo Freire—An Embodied Pedagogy,” in Paulo Freire: The Global Legacy, ed. Michael A. Peters and Tin Besley (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 517–27.

^{iv} I use Edward Wimberly’s book *Recalling Our Own Stories* in my Level 1 curriculum. Edward P. Wimberly, *Recalling Our Own Stories: Spiritual Renewal for Religious Caregivers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019).

^v Fawning is a trauma response in which a person develops people-pleasing behaviors to avoid conflict and establish a sense of safety.

^{vi} Matthew Knowles suggests that an adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experiences that is a rich resource for learning. Sharan B. Merriam, Rosemary S. Caffarella, and Lisa Baumgartner, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey - Bass, 2007), 89.

^{vii} I had previously focused on understanding the student’s conscious and unconscious awareness of their behavior to promote growth and change as well as to unpack the student’s resistance to learning.

^{viii} My colleague utilizes this theory as well; this is a shared concept in our curriculum.

^{ix} Yvonne Agazarian and Susan Gantt , “System Centered Approach to Group as a Whole” (Eastern Group Psychotherapy Society, March 2005); Roberta M. Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory: A New Way of Thinking about the Individual and the Group* (Falls Church, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2018); Peter A. Levine, *Healing Trauma: A Pioneering Program for Restoring the Wisdom of Your Body* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2008).

^x “Knowing your own darkness is the best method for dealing with the darkneses of other people.” Carl Jung to Kendig B. Cully, September 25, 1931, *Letters of C. G. Jung: Volume 1, 1906–1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

^{xi} Level 2.1. articulates an understanding of the pastoral role that is congruent with one’s personal and cultural values, basic assumptions, and personhood.

^{xii} Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, 40.

“Making a way out of no way” is a popular phrase among black churches and communities. Monica A. Coleman, a womanist scholar, in her book *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), articulates a womanist approach to survival and salvation.

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^{xii} Tracey Ollis , “Activism, Reflection and Paulo Freire—An Embodied Pedagogy,” in Paulo Freire: The Global Legacy, ed. Michael A. Peters and Tin Besley (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 517–27.

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^{xii} Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, 40.

^{xiii} Swanee Hunt-Meeks, “The Anthropology of Carl Jung: Implications for Pastoral Care,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 22, no. 3 (1983): 195.