Complicating How Classroom Climate Works: Advancing the Framework

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Abstract:

Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, and Norman (2010) have developed a framework that explains how different dimensions of classroom climate and student development interact with each other to have an impact on student learning. The framework helps us identify classroom factors that play a role in shaping a unique classroom moment and consider how we can create a classroom climate that is conducive to learning. In this article, we apply the framework to a real classroom situation to identify what the framework does and does not fully capture or articulate. Then, we present an extended framework that includes three new features. First, the framework addresses broader contexts of the classroom, namely institutional and social contexts that carry unique histories, policies, and social relations that are specific to the geographical location. Second, the framework identifies instructors as key players, besides students, in the classroom. Third, the framework introduces the notion of reciprocity to address social implications of learning to extend our focus beyond maximizing student learning. By addressing these points, the article contributes to deepening and broadening our conceptualization of classroom climate and its relationship with learning.

Key Words:

Classroom climate, learning, faculty development, identity, Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, power dynamics.

Introduction

Echoing debates around a need to prepare university instructors to teach in diverse classrooms (Dimitrov, Dawson, Olsen, & Meadows, 2014; Stone, 2006; Teekens, 2003), we, as staff in a teaching and learning centre at a Canadian university, are often asked to offer what are typically called "diversity sessions" as professional development opportunities for teaching communities on campus (e.g. faculty, Teaching Assistants). We recognize that these requests come from varying needs, concerns, circumstances, and above all, nothing but good intentions. At the same time, we cannot help but notice a few common assumptions underlying some, if not all, of these requests. One of the common assumptions is that diversity is about "Them," students coded, for example, as international and Indigenous, who may not be perceived to fit the white Western normalcy paradigm (Ahmed, 2012; Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Hikido & Murray, 2015). We also see that session requests often implicitly or explicitly expect "individual (interpersonal) skill development to bridge equalized differences among cultures regardless of the context, setting, or historical/political moment" (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010, pp. 2-3). These requests seem to reflect, to some extent, instructors' inclinations to seek classroom management strategies rather than attending to the deeper structural issues of difference, power, and privilege that give rise to difficult classroom situations (Harlap, 2014).

We find the classroom climate framework by Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, and Norman (2010) helpful in shifting the focus of conversations in these sessions from how to support or communicate with Them (i.e., minority students) to what shapes classroom climate and how we might be able to create a supportive and productive classroom climate for everyone. Numerous scholars have also discussed classroom climate and student learning. However, their primary focus tends to be on testing or identifying a cause-effect relationship between particular dimensions of classroom climate (Ghaith, Shaaban, & Harkous, 2007; Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan, 2011) and certain learning outcomes or student behaviours (Corkin, Yu, Wolters, & Wiesner, 2014; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; Persson, 2015; Ratcliff, Jones, Costner, Savage-Davis, & Hunt, 2010). As we will explain further in this article, we find Ambrose et al.'s (2010) classroom climate framework particularly useful in understanding the complexity and intricacy of classroom climate and student learning. Their framework lays out the breadth of classroom climate, instead of focusing on particular aspects. In addition, it acknowledges and explains the complex and nonlinear ways in which different aspects of classroom climate are related to student learning. Moreover, few scholars offer a comprehensive classroom climate framework contextualized specifically in post-secondary settings. The work of Ambrose et al., in contrast, is grounded in student development theories for college-level students, which is the student group with which we are concerned.

Yet, at the same time, we found areas for further development of the framework by Ambrose et al. (2010). First, we found their classroom climate framework did not address larger structures of power located within specific geographical and historical contexts. Second, we found that the framework did not articulate the presence of instructors as contributing to classroom climate. Besides students, the instructor is a major player in the classroom space. Third, the focus on the theorization of learning by

Ambrose et al. is to enhance student learning and performance, which is important and helpful in its own right. However, we recognized a need to articulate the ends of learning as well. As we embed the classroom in its contextual layers, we see learning in a reciprocal relationship with the classroom and its contexts, instead of seeing it as a static end-point.

In this article, we present a framework that builds upon the missing pieces in Ambrose et al.'s (2010) classroom climate framework, namely contextual layers, instructor, and reciprocity. We cannot predict or fully control what is going to happen in the classroom, and the new framework that we present in this article offers neither a complete picture of classroom climate nor prescriptive solutions for challenging classroom moments. Nonetheless, we believe that without an analytical vocabulary to identify complex components of classroom dynamics, instructors are unable to recognize and explain, let alone effectively intervene in, challenging classroom moments as they arise. The goal of this article is to offer a more comprehensive analytical framework for more productive teaching and learning experiences in the classroom.

To be clear, the focus of this article is not multicultural education, Indigenous education, or intercultural communications. As described earlier, our ideas for the article sprung from our work concerning cultural and social diversity in the classroom. In addition, the paper draws on an example of a classroom situation arising from teaching and discussing Indigenous issues, as it was described by an Indigenous student. However, creating a productive and inclusive classroom climate should not be a concern only when a certain group of students is present in the classroom or when socially contentious issues are discussed. As we discuss later, everyone in the classroom – all students as well as the instructor – are part of classroom climate, and the climate has an impact on each individual's experience.

While we draw on literature from various contexts, it is important to note that our work is grounded in a specific place, Vancouver, British Columbia, located on traditional, ancestral, and unceded Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh territories. To date, 95% of the land of the province of British Columbia, including Vancouver, is unceded, meaning that it does not have treaties and that "First Nations people did not give it up or legally sign it away to Britain or Canada" (The City of Vancouver, 2014, p. 14). In this article, we present our examples situated in this particular geo-political context in order to demonstrate that classroom climate is not entirely abstract, and instead, embodies local specificities. In addition, we draw on the knowledge and pedagogical approaches shared by Indigenous scholars, Elders, and other educators with whom we work closely in this specific institutional location. However, this is not to suggest or claim that the article represents an Indigenous perspective or the entire Musqueam community's perspectives. Rather, by acknowledging and articulating some of the locally specific aspects of classroom climate in our institutional setting, we encourage readers to think about how their specific locations shape unique classroom climates.

The article is comprised of four parts. First, we present a classroom scenario that took place at the University of British Columbia (UBC) Vancouver campus, located on Musqueam territory. Second, we unpack the scenario using the framework by Ambrose

et al. (2010). Third, we identify the factors not included in their classroom climate framework in order to illustrate how these missing components implicitly yet powerfully contribute to the classroom dynamics. Fourth, we close by adding the concepts of reciprocity and witnessing to our revised classroom climate framework in order to articulate the relationship between classroom climate and learning.

Classroom Scenario

A scenario we present in this section depicts a difficult classroom situation that happened at UBC. The situation resulted in a negative classroom experience for a student and continued to impact her ability to learn beyond the class time. Our intention in drawing on this case study is to locate our article within a specific classroom context and to provide an authentic narrative that articulates classroom climate from a student point of view. The scenario is selected from the research project, *What I Learned in Class Today: Aboriginal issues in the Classroom* (Crey & Perreault, 2007). Below is an excerpt from an interview with UBC student Vicki George from the project:

> We were talking about First Nations stuff, so there's totally First Nations content in the course and in this particular discussion. And for some reason, this non-First Nations student stands up and has the floor for about 10 minutes. …He said, "When Aboriginal people walk into a room, they are considered political. They're just political, that's just the way it is." ...I said:
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>> You know, when Aboriginal people walk into the room, they're Aboriginal people. If you choose to think of us as political, that's something different. And that's a general statement, it's an assumption, it's a stereotype. You know, I could just say, "You as a White person, when you walk into the room you're political." What does that mean, exactly? Like, what are you getting at?
>
> He couldn't answer me, and as I was responding to his rant, I didn't even get to the, him talking about Black people. I was just dealing with this comment, this one comment. There were others. So as I was listening to him and after I made my response, I had another student on the other side of me say, "Be quiet, he has a right to say what he wants." So I looked at her and said, "Excuse me, I have a right to say something too, and it's called a response, and I was responding to his racial comments. So don't tell me to be quiet."...
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> And at one point the instructor did say, as she's scanning the room and looking at all of us, "Is there anybody who wants to respond to this?" She was actually, the way that it was posed was that, you know, she was just hoping and pleading that somebody respond to him....
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> And there was this paper that was due in that class, and, seriously for one week I was so angry about what had happened in that classroom, and I was so angry about the way it was...poorly dealt with that when I wrote that paper for that class,...that day would come back, and how it just made me angry. And so I just, I couldn't even do it.

This situation is based on what Vicki shared as part of her experience in the classroom. Additional details, such as the identities of her classmates and the instructor, their emotional states, and the context in which their heated exchange occurred (e.g.,

the history of the student dynamics in the class, the conversation that preceded the described classroom situation), are not available. However, the interview excerpt as it stands represents a real classroom situation because it is impossible for anyone to have access to all the supplementary information about the situation while being in the moment. In addition, as we will describe in the following sections, a variety of factors in the classroom interact with each other in a nonlinear way to give rise to a particular situation. Therefore, in this article, instead of seeking to provide the full details of the situation or to pinpoint which factor, out of myriad possibilities, caused the situation, we present our analysis of this rather incomplete student account of a classroom situation in order to demonstrate how our developed classroom climate framework might help us navigate an unclear and complex classroom moment.

Classroom Climate: Original Framework

As is abundantly clear in this scenario, the classroom is not a static intellectual space but rather a multi-dimensional and dynamic space. The complex space of the classroom can be framed in terms of classroom climate. Ambrose et al. (2010) define classroom climate as "the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn" (p. 170). As Figure 1 illustrates, different aspects of the classroom climate and student development interact with each other to have an impact on student learning and performance. Ambrose et al. highlight intellectual development and social identity development as particularly salient aspects of student development that have important implications for shaping classroom climate.
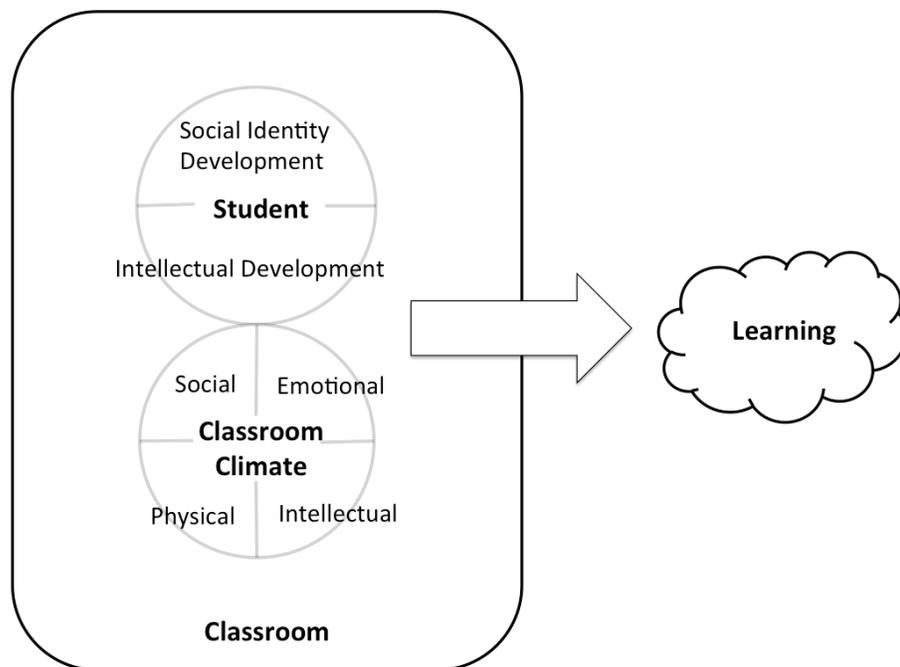

Figure 1. Interactive effect of student development and classroom climate on learning. Adapted from Ambrose et al. (2010, p. 157).

According to them, for college-level students, a significant area of their development arises from identifying themselves with certain social groups. Also, students walk into the classroom with different levels and forms of intellectual capacity. Depending on where students are at in their intellectual development, the way they react to course content or a class discussion shapes a particular climate in the classroom.

Ambrose et al. (2010) explain that different elements of the classroom environment depicted in this framework are not mutually exclusive but rather interact with one another in a non-linear way. Vicki's story demonstrates how students' intellectual development and social identity development intricately interact with intellectual, social, and emotional dimensions of classroom climate to affect student learning not only for Vicki but also for the rest of the class. Her account suggests that, in this particular class, there was dissonance between some students' prior knowledge and the intellectual requirements of the class, which included the discussion of First Nations topics. It is possible to see that the student who commented, "When Aboriginal people walk into a room, they are considered political" and the other student who supported him might have had limited understandings of the diversity and complexity of Aboriginal communities. Their insufficient prior knowledge limited their ability to engage with the intellectual tasks and goals of the course. Moreover, combined with their different levels of knowledge, the students' different social identities created a conflicting emotional and social climate in the room. As an Indigenous person, Vicki was offended and upset by her classmate's stereotypical comments about Indigenous people. Equally upsetting was the gesture from another classmate who told her to be quiet when this situation escalated. If these classmates had had a clearer sense of how they are positioned in systems of privilege and oppression, especially in relation to Indigenous peoples in Canada, they may have thought twice about what it would mean for them as non-Indigenous people to say what they were going to say.

These heated exchanges between the students created an adversarial social climate and toxic emotional climate in the classroom as a whole. As well as for Vicki and the students who spoke up in the incident, it could also be supposed that the situation raised various emotions for the rest of the students in the class, such as confusion, discomfort, and anger. The instructor missed an opportunity to transform the politically and emotionally charged exchange into a teachable moment. For example, instead of letting the stereotyping remarks about Aboriginal peoples slide, the instructor could have stopped the class to engage in an analysis of the remarks by asking questions, such as from whose standpoint Aboriginal peoples are viewed as political, who benefits from this narrative, and who is silenced by it. Without a proper intervention by the instructor, the intellectual climate of the classroom became unproductive not only for Vicki but also for all of the students in the class. The poorly handled classroom moment might have left the other students in the class feeling threatened or overwhelmed by the intensity associated with the topic and not wanting to go back to learn more about it.

Details of the physical aspect of the classroom climate in Vicki's scenario are unknown, except that it was a face-to-face class. We can only speculate how her class discussion might have gone differently depending on classroom type (e.g., an auditorium, a small classroom, a lab), layout (e.g., students sit facing the front of the room, students sit in small groups, everyone sits in a circle), and medium (e.g., face-to-

face, online). Attention to this aspect of classroom climate will be explored later in this paper, where we discuss how the classroom environment, including its physical aspect, is deeply embedded in its broader social context.

As demonstrated in our analysis of the case scenario so far, the classroom climate framework by Ambrose et al. (2010) helps us direct our attention to classroom factors, many of which are invisible, and think about how each of these factors interact with each other to shape a particular classroom climate and student learning experience. Vicki's story illustrates an explicit conflict in the classroom. However, it is important to note that, as Ambrose et al. stress, classroom climate does not always encompass blatant uncivil behaviours or explicit stereotypes directed towards a certain group of people. Classroom climate can also include more subtle incidents or factors, such as the tone instructors set, omission of certain perspectives in the course material, implicit stereotypes expressed in class discussions, and the demographics of the class. For example, Huston and DiPietro (2007) report that instructors' failure to address a collective crisis outside the classroom, such as the 9-11 terrorist attacks or a shooting in the region, negatively affected students' learning by causing feelings of frustration, disappointment, or apathy. In contrast, students appreciated instructors who addressed relevant current events in a humane way, even if the recognition was in a simple form, like one minute of silence. This finding suggests the importance of the instructor in attending not only to subtleties of classroom climate within the physical bounds of the classroom but also to broader social contexts outside the classroom; these broader social contexts that are connected to the classroom are not clearly articulated in the classroom climate framework by Ambrose et al. Hence, in the following section, we introduce our framework that addresses additional complexities of classroom climate.

Adding Complexities of Classroom Climate

In this section, we present our revised classroom climate framework that builds upon the work of Ambrose et al. (2010). As illustrated in Figure 2, our extended framework addresses contextual layers and the instructor's role in the classroom, which are not clearly articulated or identified in the original framework. First, we outline contextual layers that lie beneath the classroom environment – place, histories, policies, and social relations – at both institutional and social levels; drawing on the above case scenario, we discuss how these layers are manifested in the classroom environment. Second, we locate the instructor in these layers and discuss how the instructor's identity, as well as the identities of the students, are situated within these layers to create a unique classroom dynamic. In doing so, we address the importance of developing instructor capacity to understand and navigate the complexities of their own classrooms.

Social and Institutional Contexts:
Place, Histories, Policies, and Social Relations

The heated exchanges between the students in Vicki's story represent power struggles. Ambrose et al. (2010) touch on issues of power struggles in their examples of challenging classroom situations, but the classroom as a site of struggle is neither articulated nor fully unpacked in their work. Without a good grasp of the specificities and depth of the context that give a rise to a challenging classroom moment, instructors cannot fully identify possible problems nor consider how to intervene. We have

therefore developed the classroom climate framework by identifying a few key contextual layers that apply to the classroom situation in the case scenario, namely, the specific geographical location, histories, policies, and social relations at institutional and social levels that add to the classroom climate.
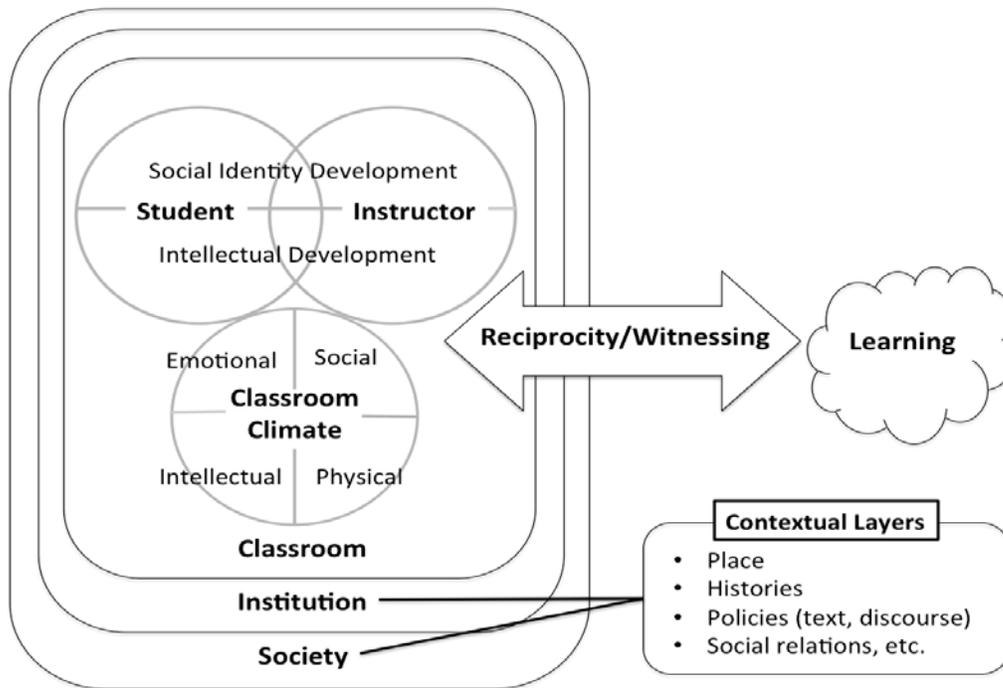

Figure 2. Extended framework of classroom climate.

Social context

First of all, the classroom incident in Vicki's story happened in a particular geographical and geo-political location – Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, on the UBC campus located on unceded Musqueam territory. Although the histories of place are often hidden and invisible as a result of colonialism (Stanley, 2009), they play a foundational role in shaping our policies and social relations. Ball (1993) describes policy not only as text but also as discourse; as discourse, policy exercises power through the production of truth and knowledge. He contends, "We do not speak a discourse, it speaks us. *We are* the subjectivities, the voices, the knowledge, the power relations that a discourse constructs and allows....[W]e take up the positions constructed for us within policies" (p. 14). The Indian Act is one such policy document that defines Indigenous peoples' identities and rights in relation to the rest of population in Canada (Hanson, n.d.). Another set of Canadian policies that acts as a discursive mechanism to construct knowledge, identity, and power relations is Canadian multiculturalism. While multicultural policies posit everyone as equal while emphasizing and even celebrating cultural differences, multiculturalism also masks racial and other inequalities (Bannerji, 2000). Likewise, by locating Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples as equal members of Canadian society, the discourse of multiculturalism erases the history of white supremacist colonialism and its legacies (St. Denis, 2011).

These geographical, historical, and policy layers of the social context of Vicki's classroom incident reveal that the Indian Act not only shapes Vicki's identity as an Indigenous person but also her relationship with the white male student. Whereas these students are presumed as equal individuals in Canadian multiculturalism, they are undeniably positioned very differently in the systems of privilege and oppression in Canada, as made clear by the Indian Act. The student who singled out Indigenous people as political and the other student who silenced Vicki imply that, having been in a social position that has allowed them to hold an unquestioned self-image as "fair" and "non-political," they failed to critically think about their assumptions and the socio-political weight of their words directed toward an Indigenous person in Canada.

Thus, layers of the social context of the classroom interact with each other and permeate through classroom climate. However, as online interactions are increasingly integrated into our teaching and learning practice, one might wonder how things may be different if the physical environment of the class is on-line. Some studies report that an online classroom environment, in which student identities are anonymized, helps their class participation because an environment as such frees them from anxiety of others' eyes of judgment, including the fear of being stereotyped or prejudiced based on their appearance or social identities, or being judged for their opinions or mistakes (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011; Sullivan, 2002). Indeed, anonymity in the classroom could reduce students' unproductive performance anxiety and self-consciousness and allow them to push their boundaries and freely explore new ideas or practice newly learned skills. However, it is equally possible that, because of this anonymity and sense of security behind computer screens, some students could feel freer to express their views that may be offensive or harmful to others, and other students are likely to remain bystanders (Straumsheim, 2014, 2015).

We can only imagine how Vicki's class discussion might have gone if had it been in an online setting. Whatever the case might have been, it is pivotal to remember that cyberspace is neither a completely anonymous nor neutral space, where we can completely detach our interactions from our social context, such as racial relations and history (Jenkins, 2002). Regardless of whether the classroom is online or face-to-face and whether or to what extent our identities are visible to each other, our classroom interactions, as well as our bodies, are deeply embedded in the social contexts that shape who we are in relation to each other.

Lastly, it is important to note how these social contextual layers permeate through different disciplinary fields and practices to shape unique classroom climates. For example, according to Pon (2009), child protection services in the field of social work in Canada were built upon the colonial and white supremacist view of Aboriginal mothers and their cultures as being deficient. He argues that the popular discourse of cultural competency in the field today functions to mask Canada's history of colonialism and racism by putting culture at the forefront, while essentializing culture and othering non-whites at the same time by obviating and neutralizing racialist language. Depending on whether this discourse of cultural competency is brought to the classroom with or without critical insights, the intellectual, social, and emotional climate of the classroom would greatly change. Gender is another salient aspect of identity that intersects with other aspects of identity to structure social relations in some disciplines and pose

challenges to underrepresented groups. For example, nursing education as a traditionally female-oriented field can contain an inhospitable climate for male students (Anthony, 2004; O'Lynn, 2004). In contrast, the situation can be otherwise in fields that have been male-dominated, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (Sinnes & Løken, 2014); as others have noted, in STEM fields, instructors' implicit bias against female students could damage their learning experiences and career paths (Jackson, Hillard, & Schneider, 2014).

Institutional context

As mentioned earlier, UBC stands on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people, who have proven their resilience and resurgence even while their history has long been hidden or ignored by others who occupy the land (Lindsay & Ling, 2015). We argue that this specific historical and geographical location of the institution significantly shapes classroom climate. For example, the place and history of the institution inform the development of some institutional policies, such as *Place and Promise: The UBC Plan*, which includes Aboriginal Engagement as one of UBC's institutional priorities (The University of British Columbia, 2012). This strategic pillar promotes the acknowledgement and integration of Indigenous cultures and histories into the university's curriculum and operations. In addition, mandatory Indigenous courses are being created in some faculties, such as the Faculty of Law and the Teacher Education Program in the Faculty of Education. Such policy developments are not simply to be perceived as "progressive"; in fact, these policies are controversial. For example, Dehaas (2012) writes his opposing view against a mandatory Indigenous course as redundant, unfair, and coercive. Whether his claims are valid and whether Indigenous course requirements are effective policy strategies are beyond the scope of this paper. However, Dehaas's frank opinions make us think about the unintended consequences of such required courses and the impact this has on classroom climate. We would be concerned about an emotional climate of the classroom stirred by students like him who are resentful of being required to be there, the intellectual climate being disrupted by their lack of motivation, and a conflicting social climate between students who feel coerced and other students who are eager to learn.

In addition to policies related to Indigenous engagement, UBC, like many other post-secondary institutions, has policies that promote diversity and inclusion, such as Intercultural Understanding, which appears as another strategic pillar of *Place and Promise* (UBC, 2012). However, like the aforementioned critique of multiculturalism as a policy discourse, the discourses of diversity and inclusion in higher education are subject to the criticism that they present diversity as "shorthand for inclusion, as the 'happy point' of intersectionality, a point where lines meet" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 14). In other words, inclusion and diversity policies act to discursively shift the perception of the university from being white to being diverse, thereby masking and reproducing, instead of challenging or changing, whiteness and racism in the institution (Ahmed, 2012). Hikido and Murray's (2015) study demonstrates how students can remain oblivious to their white normalcy beliefs and racism while embracing their campus environment that has many racial minority students and upholds an institutional value in diversity. A diverse classroom with no apparent conflict among students can be deeply entrenched in such a contradictory discourse of diversity within the institution.

Students' social relations and everyday experiences inside and outside the classroom are located within a specific institutional space infused with these multiple contexts that are intricately interrelated, and contradictory at times. As the narratives of two UBC students Wiebe and Ho (2014a, 2014b, 2014c) – the former being a Métis and the latter being a non-Indigenous person of colour – illustrate, students' experiences of settler colonialism in the classroom and more broadly on campus are specific to the location of the university and their differing social positions. Likewise, in Vicki's case scenario, the comment that Aboriginal people are political and the heated exchange that followed needed to be unpacked in relation to the institutional context specific to UBC. The instructor could have stopped the moment for the entire class to have everyone reflect on what had just happened in the classroom and their verbal or internal reactions to it from their own social locations on unceded Musqueam territory. By bringing the discussion to a specific geographical location that contains specific historical facts and social relations, the instructor could have created a space for everyone to think critically of their assumptions, their positionalities, and why the classroom incident was problematic in a concrete, rather than abstract, way.

Instructor

Ambrose et al. (2010) describe social identity development and intellectual development as salient aspects of the learning process for students, but we contend that instructors' social identities and intellectual development also have significant implications for classroom climate and student learning. Details of the instructor are unknown in Vicki's story. Regardless, the literature suggests that the instructor's identities and her inability to effectively intervene in the classroom situation must have played a significant role in shaping the classroom climate.

The instructor's social identities, such as race, gender, and Indigenous heritage, create a unique classroom dynamic, as well as a unique teaching experience for the instructor. For example, it is reported that female faculty and faculty of colour are more prone to experience classroom incivility than their white, male colleagues (Alexander-Snow, 2004). In addition, studies show common challenges that minority female instructors experience, such as student hostility and resistance, in teaching social justice issues in university classrooms (Dua & Lawrence, 2000; Rodriguez, Boahene, Gonzales-Howell, & Anesi, 2012). Yet, even among female instructors of colour, their differing social locations in relation to the historical context of their geographical location shape their various experiences. A study by Dua and Lawrence (2000) found that the racism that female Aboriginal instructors experience is more complex than the racism other female instructors of colour face in Canada because those who are Aboriginal have to navigate the intersection of racism and colonialism. This finding raises a question as to how Vicki's classroom situation might have played out differently depending on the instructor's identities.

Regardless of what kinds of identities the instructor may embody, what is crucial for all instructors is that they are able to engage with classroom dynamics as they unfold. As discussed earlier, problematic moments in the classroom are not always explicit and malicious but often implicit and unintentional, which makes it all the more important for instructors to have sensitivity and an ability to recognize, name, and act upon implicit or

nuanced forms of aggression in the classroom, which are often called *microaggressions* (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Microaggressions are defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2009, p. 183). Classroom microaggressions are a rather prevalent phenomenon. A recent study found microaggressions in nearly 30% of the observed college classrooms in the United States (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). In the study, more microaggressions were observed in the institutions with the highest concentrations of racial/ethnic minority students, which speaks to our earlier discussion on the relationship between the institutional context and classroom climate. Further, instructors were found to be the most common perpetrators of classroom microaggressions, and the most frequent types of microaggressions were those that attacked the intelligence and competence of students. This finding raises the point that antagonists are not always students. Instructors can make classroom climate toxic as well as productive.

In sum, for instructors to be able to create a classroom climate that is conducive to learning, they need to be well aware of how not only their students but also they themselves are socially positioned in a classroom that is layered with multiple contextual factors. To be able to recognize, not to mention effectively intervene in, the broad spectrum of classroom dynamics, they need to be able to articulate how they, their students, and their classrooms are all embedded in complex institutional and social contexts that carry histories, policies, and social relations specific to the place in which they are situated. Our classroom climate framework is intended to guide the analysis of the classroom for more productive teaching and learning experiences.

Reciprocity and Witnessing

As shown in Figure 1, in the classroom climate framework by Ambrose et al. (2010), learning is posited as an outcome of the classroom environment the instructor creates. However, as the two-way arrow in Figure 2 illustrates, we propose an interactive way of looking at the relationship between the classroom environment and learning by introducing the concepts of *reciprocity* and *witnessing*. By locating learning not as an end goal but as an ongoing process through interaction with the classroom and its context, our framework addresses the need to attend not only to how to maximize student learning but also to how to make learning meaningful to the broader society. Our intention of connecting the classroom and learning with the concepts of reciprocity and witnessing is to signal a social and ethical responsibility that students and instructors bear for reciprocating the knowledge generated in their classrooms with communities, transcending the walls of the classroom and the university.

The idea of reciprocity is closely tied to the concept of *active witnessing*, which holds individuals, such as learners, accountable for the knowledge received and asks them to contribute what they have learned back to the land and communities in which one's learning is taking place. This conception of reciprocity and witnessing is greatly informed by teachings we have received from the Musqueam community, as well as by scholarly critiques of neoliberal approaches to learning for private or individual gains (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Williams, 2012). In recounting the story of həm̓ləsəm̓əm,

which is a Musqueam site of transformation, Musqueam Elder Larry Grant asks students to consider knowledge not as a consumable entity but rather as a renewable resource to be shared by all and for generations to come (Indigenous Initiatives, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology, University of British Columbia, 2014). The process of giving back to communities requires not only sharing learning outcomes, such as research findings and learning reflections, at the end of a project but also relationship-building throughout the process and after a project (Kovach, 2009). For example, instructors might consider reciprocity more intentionally as a process within their course design as a way to create space for relationship building and respectful consultations with communities. In this learning process, guided by the notion of reciprocity, students' question would shift from "What's in it for me?" to "What are the community's interests and needs? What is my role?"

To make the process of reciprocity and witnessing meaningful, it is essential for educators and students to deeply understand the context in which learning is taking place. As illustrated in our discussions about the contextual layers of the classroom, reciprocity and witnessing also exist in a complex network of layers of the classroom environment. This is to say that, without understanding where we are and how we are situated in relation to others within the classroom context, it would be difficult to comprehend what we are witnessing and experiencing, and difficult to envision our role in sharing the knowledge we have received from communities in a mutually beneficial way.

For example, the classroom scenario that Vicki encountered made it apparent that her classmates had not had the opportunity to come to terms with uncovering hidden histories of the place where they were learning and each of their individual relationships to the historical layers of the classroom. What needed to happen for both students and instructor in that classroom moment was what Berlak (1999) calls *becoming witnesses*, through which one is "transformed into a state of 'awareness' that shatters the silence, bursting open cultural secrets, and allowing moments of insight when repressed ideas, feelings, and memories surface into consciousness" (p. 107). In relating this to Vicki's classroom situation, there was what Berlak calls an *erasure*, which is described as a failure to witness. Berlak explains this "as one effect of the dominant frameworks or discourses through which they, like members of all dominant 'racial' groups, have been shown the world" (p. 110). In this situation, Vicki's classmates had been shown through their educational experiences that their dominant perspectives did not need to be questioned, and in fact they took offence to Vicki's reaction to their behaviour. This situation illustrates that instructors need to consider the complexity of the classroom space as a site where ill-informed perspectives, closely held beliefs, and dominant behaviours are all forces at play and students enter the classroom not as neutral bodies, but rather products of the institutions they continue to be part of.

For both students and instructors, it is a challenging task to question their knowledge and the assumptions that have been shaped by their previous education and socialization processes; however, this is what is required to reach such a state of awareness. Moreover, once they have this new knowledge and awareness, they can consider what kinds of roles they could play from their own social locations, although this process might raise various feelings, such as resistance, fear, and anxiety. This

process can be emotionally challenging because it asks them to look inward and critically reflect on the institutions in which their knowledge and social being have been conditioned and how many of them may have benefitted from these institutions.

In teaching and learning about traumatic events, such as Indian Residential Schools and the Holocaust, aiming at what Gubkin (2015) calls *empathetic understanding* may appear to be a "safer" approach. In this approach, students place themselves in the position of the "other" in order to recognize and appreciate world-views that differ from their own. However, this pedagogical approach can be limiting and problematic, if not entirely meaningless, because learning could end with students self-indulging in feeling moral enlightenment through empathy, guilt, or outrage (Razack, 2007).

Gubkin (2015) proposes *engaged witnessing* as an alternative pedagogical approach, which is similar to what Berlak (1999) calls *bearing witness*. In this approach, students are encouraged to move past feeling safe or good and to develop a collective sense of responsibility among themselves to act in response to what they have learned. In learning about traumatic histories, for example, students need to recognize and act on what happened in the past and its implications for the present, which includes their complicity in the pain inflicted on the other directly or indirectly through systems of oppression. This process may make them feel "unsafe." However, feeling unsafe is an inevitable and necessary process in critically and actively engaging with the past and present injustices, which we are trained not to see or to see as "normal" (Barrett, 2010; Boler, 1999; Redmond, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). Instead of uncritically striving toward creating a safe space, we need to move forward with creating a classroom climate that may not always be safe but does not inflict harm on students (Gubkin, 2015).

There is no single solution or recipe for how to create a classroom environment where everyone can feel vulnerable but also supported. We acknowledge that feeling the urge to have practical strategies may be inevitable. Yet, we believe that when both instructors and students gain a clear understanding of interrelated layers of their classroom space and their positionalities within them, they can begin to grapple with how they can collectively practice reciprocity and witnessing in their learning contexts.

Conclusion

Recognizing that one can never be fully prepared for what might happen in the classroom, we envision a framework for classroom climate that encompasses place, histories, policies, and social relations that can serve as a roadmap to assist instructors and students in unpacking complex situations as they arise. They can use the framework as an analytical tool as they consider what happens in the classroom and how they may be able to move forward. This process may not always be comfortable for either instructors or students. However, it is our hope that our framework will help them open up conversations instead of shutting them down in fear, and will lend conceptual clarity on why and how they are situated so uncomfortably with one another in the shared classroom space that seems to be neutral on the surface. We also hope that this framework can help instructors set up a classroom climate that invites discomfort and nurtures the potential for transformation.

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