

Fostering a Sense of Community through the Dialectical Notebook

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Writer Sarah Aziza once wrote, “there is no proper entrance to an essay.”¹ That is rightfully so! I have been caught up in a wide spectrum of ideas to choose the first words to begin this essay, given the huge variety of alternatives that were lying on my crafting plate. I thought very often of Peter Elbow who remarks in his chapter on freewriting in *Writing without Teachers*, “You can work for two hours trying to get a paragraph right and discover it’s not right at all. And then give up.”² Then I realized I needed to switch from second order to first order thinking to get things going. And ever since I opted for this, I just couldn’t let my pen rest. The generative writing vessel I boarded brought me to start by giving an overview of where I’m based and what I do in the professional realm.

1 A SENSE OF WHERE I’M BASED

I’m based in the Haitian Education & Leadership Program (HELP), a nonprofit that offers merit- and needs-based university scholarships to top high school students in Haiti. The mere act of mentioning HELP here perfectly reminds me of the reason why I have decided to join the organization. It was because of the mission. Perusing the HELP website, here is what one can read in the mission section: “HELP’s mission is to create [...] a community of young professionals and leaders who will promote a more just society in Haiti.” We can read further on HELP’s website what follows: “The program launches students on a trajectory of service to Haiti that begins the day they start at HELP and continues as they pursue their careers that position them to contribute to their communities.”³ HELP, through its mission, scaffolds the core characteristics of community building and community development by providing students with the convenient means to thrive and bring their stone in the construction of the community, as HELP envisions it.

One key component of what is offered to the students for their journey to community development is the *Leadership* course, which allows them to become aware

of the type of leaders they are through the analysis and scrutiny of various leadership theories. Another vector crucial to leading them towards community development is the service-learning program that offers them the opportunity to put into practice all the leadership theories they have been learning, through the elaboration and implementation of various relevant projects on behalf of their home communities. Moreover, the fact that all HELP students live on campus in the dorms – having the opportunity to experience life in community – allows them to take their first steps towards community building on both territorial and relational levels. Thus, underscoring, cultivating and displaying the qualities that enhance community development is a vital part of my work as a teacher in the HELP context. And that is the very first reason that led me to consider and explore the topic of my essay.

Community-building refers to the activity of strengthening the element of community vigor and improving the living standard of the residents.⁴ Community building is tightly linked with another important concept that community psychologists refer to as “sense of community.” Developing a community involves meeting the priority needs of community members, promoting common values and culture, controlling the direction of change, having the capacity to meet needs and care for members, and providing opportunities for social contact and positive experiences. According to Hyde and Chavis, the success of a community-building initiative may be determined by the extent to which it was able to strengthen a sense of community.⁵ A key element of Hyde and Chavis’s statement is the fact that putting emphasis on the sense of community has an overarching effect of reinforcing community building/community development. Hence the importance of a sense of community. It became meaningful to me that working towards fostering a sense of community in my teaching context can help my students prepare themselves to contribute to building their communities. The same is true for any learner.

2 ABOUT “SENSE OF COMMUNITY”

McMillan and Chavis think of “sense of community” as the sense of connectedness or attachment to each other and the group and sharing closeness and affection through commitments. The perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure, all comprise a “sense of community.”⁶

Sarason’s conceptualization of a sense of community is anchored to two key elements, the affective quality of feeling as though one belongs and the notion of interdependence. This approach is well supported by Garrett, Spreitzer, and Bace-

vice, who describe a sense of community through shared emotional connection, influence, reinforcement, and membership.”⁷

3 WHAT I DO, IN TERMS OF TEACHING CONTEXT, AND HOW I USED TO FEEL ABOUT IT

At HELP I work as an English instructor, teaching English level 4 which is the equivalent of C2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages scale. I have been teaching for eleven years and my lovely relationship with teaching came to life when I started helping my siblings with their schoolwork as a young teenager.

However, during all those years of experience I have been able to tally, I always felt disoriented and constantly questioned my pedagogies, methods, and approaches, if I could even call them so. All that led me to experience an awful lack of confidence in my teaching. Consequently, I adopted “lecture” as the only means to impart instruction on the students, mainly because it was the way I was taught during my entire time as a student. I always felt that something was missing, I felt that the students could be more engaged and more involved in their learning. Everything was so teacher-centered that the characteristics of a real sense of community were nowhere to be seen. My load of questions got even bigger when I read about the different ways people learn and how much of a diversity there exists in terms of types of learners.

That brought me to the conclusion that lecturing can’t be the only participation structure to use in class. I went on some sort of quest to find answers to my long list of questions and to gain the confidence I was so in need of. I started searching the internet, digging into a number of open educational resources where I came across edutopia.org – a well-known online platform dedicated to improving education by sharing innovative, evidence-based strategies and resources for educators, administrators, and parents – which first introduced me to the notion of student-centered teaching. I literally devoured as many articles as I could to immerse myself in the notion. That’s when I instantly realized that I’m a student-centered pedagogies adherent, and I knew that my journey with this concept had just begun. Delving into the world of student-centered pedagogies left me craving for more information. I felt the need to explore it in a more engaged manner. Fortunately, a huge door leading to substantial discovery opened for me.

4 I DISCOVERED IWT CLASP

It was in March 2022, the academic director of my institution told the team about a professional development opportunity, weeklong workshops in July that the Center for Liberal Arts & Sciences Pedagogy (IWT CLASP) at the Bard College Institute for Writing & Thinking (IWT) facilitate. She sent us the link to the IWT CLASP website with ample details regarding the workshops. I came across something precious: “applications are now open for the second cohort of the CLASP Fellows program.” After reading the program overview, I hastily clicked on the “apply” tab to submit my application. At the time, I didn’t know that this communication, and submitting my application, would be the catalyst for a rich and fruitful experience as one of the CLASP Fellows, marking a turning point in my career as a teacher.

5 I GOT ACCEPTED IN THE IWT CLASP FELLOWS PROGRAM

In September 2022, I received an email containing a letter from the IWT CLASP team notifying me that I was accepted into the CLASP Fellows program. The program took me to a more immersive experience into everything student-centered, covering a wide range of teaching pedagogies and instructional approaches, all intertwined with writing-based practices. Ever since I started the program, I noticed an immediate and huge change in my teaching because of the IWT practices I had started to apply in my classes, such as Loop Writing, Writing from Images, Focused Freewriting, Process Writing, etc. To be truthful, at first I doubted implementing the IWT CLASP pedagogies in my classes, not because I wasn’t certain of their effectiveness, but because I was wondering how they would be perceived by my students. However, it was beyond satisfying to notice that they wholeheartedly accepted the practices when they were introduced to them. As I started to use the pedagogies in a more engaging way, the impact they had on my students was obvious, in that they improved significantly in their critical thinking and their ability to collaborate with their peers. Moreover, they developed metacognitive skills, showed more agency in their work, displayed qualities of self-determination, and became more able to create knowledge for themselves.

On the other hand, I, too, experienced some remarkable changes for myself. I literally felt the changes the moment I took knowledge of the IWT practices, way before I started implementing them. I became more enthusiastic about teaching ever since I started using the IWT pedagogies in my classroom, such as text rendering, believing and doubting, Focused Freewriting, Private Freewriting, Process Writing, “I notice/I wonder,” writing from images, Writing in the Zones, Loop Writing, gal-

lery walk, to name a few, the difference was clear between how I used to teach then, before learning about the IWT practices and how I am teaching now, after being immersed in the wonderful IWT world. All the practices are student-centered, which is one of the aspects about those practices that trigger my enthusiasm. I literally breathed a sigh of relief. I had a wide variety of options to choose from, improving the scale of my social and emotional teaching. And more importantly, using the IWT pedagogies now helps me teach with a tremendous level of confidence.

6 HOW THE DIALECTICAL NOTEBOOK STICKS ITS HEAD OUT TO ME

As I embarked on my journey exploring various writing-based pedagogies, I found myself drawn to the profound impact of one method in particular: the Dialectical Notebook. Engaging with this practice with the other Fellows in my cohort in our workshops nurtured in me the conviction that it fosters a sense of community. This reflects the second theme of this essay. While the first theme of this essay is reflection, it also delves into my experience with this practice in the classroom, elucidating its transformative power in fostering a vibrant sense of community within the realm of writing to learn or, to put it quite simply, of overall education.

I have been navigating through an unparalleled experience as one the fellows of the CLASP Fellows Program. Being able to work in such a structure has opened doors for me to collaborate with a mosaic of wonderful and caring people possessing expertise across various disciplines, something that could be nothing but inspiring, enriching and enlightening to me. The CLASP Fellows Program mirrors the whole package of teaching pedagogies central to IWT. Taking some time to reflect on how that experience benefited me professionally has really led me to comprehend how much of an eye-opening and turning point this journey was.

The most crucial aspect of the benefits it carries is how I have been able to make substantial changes in my teaching context to align more closely with what works best in education, as stated earlier, shifting gears towards much more memorable classroom moments where learning is truly happening. But more importantly, the Fellows Program has equipped me with the right tools, strategies, and practices to go around numerous obstacles and overcome the trials we're facing on a regular basis. This is given the fact that my teaching context here in Haiti is rather one of a kind, oddly special in terms of challenges it imposes on students and instructors who are directly impacted by ongoing political unrest and social upheaval, virtually shutting down all sense of creativity and initiative causing them to lack motivation and engagement, the latter being two vital catalysts for learning to take place.

In the following lines, I'll shed light a bit more on the current context in which my students are navigating and provide details regarding their constant struggle outside of the classroom to maintain a positive mindset and the willingness to come to class. It goes without saying that those dark days are ones that increase the need for those going through them to be heard. Especially the students, they need a platform where they can naturally feel the sense of connectedness and attachment to each other and the group and sharing closeness and commitments. They need to be given opportunities to share multiple parts of their life, to tell and reflect upon stories that matter to them, to feel that their voices and choices are valued. People can never truly have a meaningful existence if they don't experience feelings of belonging to their community. And then again, we can hardly affirm that, "with advances in communication technologies primarily, there has been a decline in important ties in our communities and that decline prevents us from experiencing a sense of community".⁸ That means we don't automatically have a sense of community, it is created, it is fostered.

Moreover, when hard times like those strike, students must feel that they're provided with time for collaboration and student-to-student interaction. "Despite all the obstacles and challenges, school can – and should – be a place of connection, relationships, and caring. It is possible for us to recognize one another's entirety and create environments where there is a shared ethos of loving, serving, and creating. By working to turn classes into communities, school becomes more than a series of tasks and is instead a place where people feel a sense of belonging, value, and inspiration".⁹

Collaboration and student-to-student interaction largely contribute to helping alleviate the level of stress and anxiety felt by students, sparking their creativity and critical thinking. For this to happen, a caring environment must exist for the students where they feel safe and sound, valued, inspired; away from all their daily concerns, where they can experience a complete shift in the order of things.

There are several ways through which such an environment can be created and numerous practices help establish and maintain classroom communities. One key practice that this essay will portray is the Dialectical Notebook.

What does the Dialectical Notebook entail? According to IWT's *Student Guide to Writing-Based Teaching Practices*, a brief overview of the Dialectical Notebook says, "This practice combines Focused Freewriting and Process Writing with working in small groups, conversing through writing in order to come to a deeper understanding of a difficult text."

One key characteristic of the Dialectical Notebook is the fact that it makes it possible for students to work in groups, to collaborate in a caring context. What follows is a more comprehensive description of the practice as presented in one of the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking's guidelines.

WRITING-RICH IDEAS FOR TEACHING AT A DISTANCE.

- 1 Each student plays the role of *Writer*, *Responder 1*, and *Responder 2* once. Groups should decide if they would like to work together and complete the Dialectical Notebooks with planned deadlines for responding to each other's work.

<i>Writer: Student 1</i>	<i>Response 1: Student 2</i>	<i>Response 2: Student 3</i>	<i>Process: Student 1 (again)</i>
2 <i>Begin by asking...</i>	3 <i>Once students...</i>	4 <i>Students move...</i>	5 <i>The last step...</i>

- 2 Begin by asking students to each complete a series of Focused Freewriting responses in the first column (*Writer*) on their page.

- 1 Find a passage in the text that you are drawn to, something you really understand – copy it into this column and write to explore your thinking. Describe what you believe you understand about the text based on the passage you selected.
- 2 Find a passage that puzzles or confuses you, something you have questions about. Copy the quote and write in order to try to come to a clearer understanding of this moment in the text. You might end this piece of writing with a question that needs answering to fully understand the quote (and/or text).
- 3 What other questions does this text push you to ask?

Sample sequence of prompts.

- 3 Once students complete the *Writer* column, they should move on to respond to one of their group members' documents in the second column (*Responder 1*).

- 1 Read what your colleague wrote in their *Writer* column. Respond in the second column in the following way:

Sample prompt.

Write to help complicate your colleague's thinking for each quote or question. Write to push their thinking further, to ask additional questions, to refer your colleague to other moments in the text.

Please make sure to respond thoroughly – it is not enough to simply write “I agree” or “I don't know”. The goal here is to encourage your group member to keep thinking and reading deeply.

4 Students move on to the third person in their group's page, and write in the third column (*Responder 2*).

- 1 Read what *both* of your colleagues wrote in the first two columns. In the third column, for each question or passage, write to:

Sample prompt.

Respond to the ideas and questions raised by both of your group members with the goal of continuing to expand and complicate their thinking.

In your responses, include at least one reference to another text and make sure to write in order to make that rationale behind that connection explicit.

5 The last step of the Dialectical Notebook process is for the writer to read over the conversation that took place on their document, using the last column (*Process*) as a space to reflect and take notes.

- 1 What surprised you about the conversation that happened on your page?
- 2 What new ideas do you now want to explore and think about more?
- 3 What questions do you still have for either the text or your peers?

Sample prompts.

I still remember the first time I introduced the students to the Dialectical Notebook process as it appears in the description above. After I had done the presentation of the process, they were eager to experience it. And from that day on, they have been taking delight in using this practice every time it is chosen as a collaborative practice for a class session. What follows is a typical example of a Dialectical Notebook session in one of our classes: Using the same prompts proposed in the description above, I used, as the text to study, the introduction of David Peter Stroh's book entitled "Systems Thinking for Social Change."¹⁰ The following is one student's notebook that showcases verbatim how the written conversation unfolded in her document. Her name is Roodjina, and the other responders are Doris and Endy. What is interesting to notice is how this practice really activates the students' sense of analysis and critical thinking, also how it enhances engagement with a piece of reading, essentially when one is used for the activity. What is happening in the notebook is exactly what I wanted from my students that day:

Writer: Roodjina

After reading the text, I found a lot of things that pulled and pushed me. But, as a future professional in the area of education, I choose to do my comment on the phrase “strengthening education” because it is the concept I really want to explore. The reason is clear, I love education and I find it as a good investment, an investment in human being, an investment in future, in progress, and change. In Haiti, we face a lot of problems that destroy more and more our educational system such as problems of finance, infrastructure, curriculums that don’t reflect Haitians’ reality, teachers’ training, etc. And all that, in a way or another, affect the situation we live in, fuel the insecurity problem in the country.

Response 1: Endy

I agree with you, the education system in Haiti, is one of the main causes of our situation.

A better education system implies better professionals, better politicians, people in the public administration will do their job better. So, the situation of the country would improve significantly.

Response 2: Doris

Actually, more than better professionals, politicians..., what can make a big change in our educative system is what we want to teach. What kind of values do we want our kids to have? What do we want them to know? Where do we want to go?

Do we want to grow a generation with good values, a generation who know their past, who want to change things who, like no one, really love their country, who want it to be well seen around the world. A generation who has big dreams.

Personally, I think why Haiti is like that is because Haitians don’t love Haiti. At least, not those who are governing us.

So, teaching our kids to love their country deeply should be the first step to have a significant change in Haiti.

Process: Roodjina

I don’t have a surprise, or a new idea. But I find a lot of good ideas that I can explore here. I really appreciate their approach.

For the first comment, I share the idea that the education system in Haiti is one of the main causes of our situation.

For the second one, I welcome the questions about what can make a big change in our educational system. Questions like: what kind of values do we want our kids to have? Where do we want them to go?

And I do agree with the fact that we must teach kids to love Haiti. It’s important!

¹ A typical example of the Dialectical Notebook from one of our classes. Writers responded to the introduction to David Peter Stroh’s 2015 book *Systems Thinking for Social Change*. The prompts used were the same “pulled in” “pushed out” pairing described earlier.

7 DIFFERENT WAYS THE DIALECTICAL NOTEBOOK FOSTERS A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

To delve into the way that the Dialectical Notebook fosters that sense of community, it is important to showcase what comes before the actual act of doing the Dialectical Notebook. Instead of solely imparting my knowledge, it means embodying a moment of community building, recreating a space to sit, think and write, where the teacher breaks out of their hierarchical position and joins in building community. As Robert D. Whittemore remarks, “We create moments of collaboration that make visible what we know but also what, in our heart of hearts, we still need to know.” Taking a moment to imagine you’re using your notebook to find your sense in a state of complete chaos – that is my students’ everyday reality. On a regular basis, there is very intense commotion near students’ campus due to gang activities, such as long shooting periods along with all other types of violence, from setting houses on fire to raping young girls and women.

Students live under the constant threat of being invaded by the gangs operating not far away from their dorms, causing them to deal with a never-ending situation of anxiety. In addition to this more particular context, there is the fact that they often find themselves stuck in the dorms due to general roadblocks, preventing them from attending in-person classes at their respective universities, and at HELP. But more importantly, this situation affects their motivation and engagement to work well in school, putting them on the edge of failure, given that my students are a group of scholars who merited their university scholarship due to their academic excellence, which they find themselves under the obligation to maintain if they want to still be in possession of the scholarship.

Thus, it became obvious that they couldn’t have any other way out than to find a caring and supportive community conducive to their learning, where they can feel anchored and connected, where they can together invent mutual responsibility to build a community of learning so they can thrive.

To create this sense of community with the Dialectical Notebook, classroom management is another crucial element that must be taken into account, more specifically, the way the class is set up plays a crucial role in fostering that sense of community. The focus is not only put on the instruction per se, but more importantly on the learners’ disposition and their immediate physical classroom environment. A major emphasis is put on how every learner is in the appropriate mindset for learning, so they are socially and emotionally up to par to receive the instruction. And that is why we are so mindful of the importance of arranging the classroom in a more friendly way, to make it feel welcoming and inviting for all, creating the structure for a caring environment, one in which students can engage in productive dialogue, and develop critical thinking skills.

The go-to format of setting up the room is to get every student to sit around a table large enough to create a family-like environment where they can look at each other and have authentic and encouraging conversations with the instructor and peers before delving into the content that will be considered for the written conversation. Furthermore, that first moment before the class starts is crucial in that it allows students to spend some time doing a bit of Private Freewriting, so they get centered in the room and are prepared to receive the intended piece of instruction. One key factor in setting up the classroom in such a way is that the instructor is interwoven with the rest of the class, making it look like a group of friends gathering and safely conversing together, offering an equitable chance for everyone's voice to be heard.

It has been noticed that such a way of doing things has a highly positive impact on the students' disposition to acquire new knowledge, the level of engagement and motivation they display, and their overall performance in class. We can read from the online article "Bringing restorative practices to schools and communities - the value of utilizing circles in academic classrooms," that "Incorporating circles into academic classrooms brings a range of benefits including supporting the goals of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)."¹¹

The same article went on to specify that one of the key benefits of using circles in the classroom is that it *builds relationships and community*, giving everyone a voice, allowing classmates to get to know each other more deeply, and enhancing the ability to have difficult conversations when needed. In fact, it is really satisfying to notice how the Dialectical Notebook – the written conversation – contributes to sustaining community. Arranging the classroom in the circle format, which we argue is conducive to community building, facilitates a good unfolding, a smooth running of the Dialectical Notebook process, in that it makes it easier for the students to pass their notebooks to their peers for responses and to easily get them back afterwards to complete the process.

The concrete way the Dialectical Notebook fosters students' sense of community is that firstly, it converges everyone's thinking towards a common topic, although reflections on the latter may eventually diverge. The advantage of that resides in the fact that it invites learners to not only become aware of their thinking, which is known as metacognition, but also to contemplate their peers' thinking. This allows them to plunge into an "intellectual empathy" so they can cleverly convey their thoughts critically to construct knowledge for themselves and others.

Secondly, the Dialectical Notebook offers a platform for everyone to contribute and make room for collaborative work and learning to happen, emphasizing collaboration as a core community-building element. As Sarah Said remarks in her

article entitled “Four ways to support long-term English learners, “When students work in teams to discuss content they are writing, it builds more confidence in language input and output.”¹²

Thirdly, the Dialectical Notebook allows students to explain what they know about prior concepts and knowledge to peers, which fosters retention, helps students retrieve and recycle prior knowledge, helps them memorize key terms and notions, and makes learning “stickier.”¹³ Thus, I have noticed that, while doing the Dialectical Notebook in class, students recycle vocabulary words and important concepts, particularly if we look at it from an ESL perspective. As an ESL instructor, such an achievement represents a milestone to me, given the goals I expect my students to reach in the development of their language learning in terms of the level of accuracy they must attain.

While performing the Dialectical Notebook, students get to do different types of writing going from Focused Freewriting to Process Writing. Because we are in an ESL context, the Dialectical Notebook, from its very essence, offers students the occasion to deconstruct difficult texts. These texts are difficult due to their structure and composition and because of the narrative they convey about the overriding trials and entropy of Haitian life. Such texts are not rare in our context, and they are well-served by using the Dialectical Notebook. Hence, these texts allow me, as an ESL instructor, to intentionally experience a key notion called “authenticity,” which is central to Communicative Language Teaching. The word “authenticity” is defined as the quality of being genuine, real, and natural. However, defining authenticity is not a straightforward task where English Language Teaching is concerned.

7.1 AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is “a notion distinguishing texts extracted from real-life sources from those written for pedagogical purposes.”¹⁴ A text is considered authentic provided that it has been “created to fulfill some social purpose in the language community in which it was produced.”¹⁵ Simply stated, authentic texts contain real language, and they are written for native speakers, not for language learners.¹⁶

Contrary to traditional approaches that facilitate easy acquisition by presenting simplified language to learners, there has been a growing tendency to present authentic language, so much so that the shift towards the communicative movement has resulted in the concept of authenticity becoming central to Communicative Language Teaching. This is because reality can be imported into classrooms and learners benefit from exposure to the same language as native speakers.¹⁷ There is a consensus on the significant role that natural exposure can play in not only creating a communicative language environment, but also in paving the way for the pro-

cess of language acquisition.¹⁸ It is argued that processing input enables learners to understand the target language, as opposed to production which only provides them with an opportunity to practice what they have already learnt.¹⁹

Therefore, choosing authentic materials in doing the Dialectical Notebook gets students fully immersed in their own reality, so they are in touch with text contents that well describe their quotidian existence, providing them with the occasion to express what they carry deep inside their heart, to let go of their frustration, to make their voices heard. Using authentic materials provides an opportunity for students to share with their peers what they truly feel, their perspective of what is going on in their immediate environment. Such conversations pave the way for them to experience a mosaic of opportunities such as finding comfort and sympathy from each other, helping everyone to breathe a sigh of relief afterwards. Interestingly, those conversations go beyond the actual Dialectical Notebook activity, continuing outside the classroom and fostering a sense of community.

7.2 CREATING A PLATFORM

In that same vein, the Dialectical Notebook fosters a sense community by creating a platform for students, when doing those written conversations, to develop a plethora of “social skills,” such as empathy, allowing them to cheer each other up, helping them to face the hard times they are going through, putting themselves in each other’s shoes. It also fosters assertiveness, in that students can candidly but respectfully state their point of view concerning the texts they are studying, and it fosters teamwork, in that the learning takes place in a context of collaboration and group spirit. Those skills will enable students to adapt and succeed in whatever situation they face.

7.3 PARTICIPATION STRUCTURES

The Dialectical Notebook also creates a sense of community as it contributes to not constantly use “lecture” as the only participation structure, considering that one disadvantage of the latter is that it causes a lack of interaction from students. Robert D. Whittemore states in “Learning Culture, writing in community,”:

So, with civility as a goal and reverence our compass, what makes a good class? Probably not ‘lecturing at students’ as a singular approach to them, although a good lecture now and then probably doesn’t hurt. But certainly, as Woodruff proposes, we should learn with our students, ‘showing the curiosity, industry, and open mind that learning requires,’ including being

open to learning from students as well as providing opportunities (collaborative learning, *exchanged Dialectical Notebooks*, and reading and responding groups) for students to listen and respond to each other without our need to intrusively organize what needs to be known between them...²⁰

Emphasis added.

Therefore, the Dialectical Notebook embodies the three other participation structures - group work, questions and answers, and discussion - which are central to fostering a sense of community in the classroom, the latter being seen as a “public setting that involves a diversity of people.” Thus, the Dialectical Notebook puts that “diversity of people” into motion through writing and thinking to produce a perfect piece of students’ input that eventually results in the creation of knowledge among and for themselves. That very way of doing things is typically student-centered.

8 DATA ANALYSIS

8.1 STUDENT REFLECTIONS

In the following pages, I will showcase the testimonials of several students concerning the Dialectical Notebook activity to give an insight into the impact it has on them and how they perceive its ability to foster a sense of community.

I asked my students to reflect on the Dialectical Notebook activity after we have been doing it a couple of times, and to jot down whether they think it fosters a sense of community. Some of the students’ responses are highlighted on the following pages.

If one carefully reads the students’ comments, they will undoubtedly notice that they come from a very experiential standpoint. In fact, it was surprising to see how quickly the IWT practices were embraced by my students, most notably the Dialectical Notebook, which made it quite easy for me to implement virtually all of them in my teaching context. I was left speechless when one of my students came to me one day to tell me about a one-of-a-kind experience. They had been using the Dialectical Notebook in one of their focus group sessions, an initiative from the body of students with the aim to deconstruct, demystify, and break a plethora of taboo subjects inherent in Haitian society.

Grégory CLÉDANOR

Dialectical Notebook, this activity gives us the opportunity to have conversation with others by writing and passing a notebook. I have experienced it when analyzing an image, and the image that I wrote my viewpoint about, my friends were able to comment by analyzing my idea and the image as well.

I think that it's a very good activity for people to practice in order to develop their critical thinking skills. By expressing an idea and after waiting for others' thoughts and then to rethink about your first idea and to build a solid one, I think this will help you to build a solid argument when debating or giving one's idea about a specific subject.

To me, this activity can be very helpful in community building, because the development of a community can't be realized with only one person, that's to say that we need everybody's idea for that. So, the Dialectical Notebook gives everybody the chance to express their ideas and then to wait for other's thoughts just to come to a conclusion. So, by listening and considering everybody's ideas we can be able to get to a better point.

I think this is one of the things that we don't have in our community nowadays, the consideration of the ideas of others, pay attention to others, consider the comment or the critics of them. By that, what I want to say is that the Dialectical Notebook gives us a certain habit of listening to others whatever their ideas can be.

I am concluding to say that the Dialectical Notebook should be done more frequently at school, university so that people can start growing or acquiring this quality, because this will help them to build a future solid community by putting together their ideas and other people's.

Samuel Adams CEME

About this activity, I feel a little stressed about what the comments of the others will be regarding my work. I had a feeling of engagement and responsibility because I just considered the activity very serious. Then, I feel the obligation to be fair in my comments about the others' work. But at the end, I had a feeling of satisfaction because I liked the way I commented on each work I read, and a feeling of excitement reading different ideas from each student.

Dialectical Notebooks can help students feel like they're part of a team and everyone is important as a member of this group (sense of belonging). As students, we are sharing ideas and learning from each other. By talking about what we write in our notebooks, we help each other understand the material better. This teamwork makes learning more fun and interesting. It's like being on a journey together, exploring new ideas and growing as a group.

Stéphyna SAINT-PHAT

The Dialectical Notebook is a thought-provoking tool, fostering a dynamic exchange of ideas. Its structure encourages a continuous dialogue with oneself, cultivating a deeper understanding of personal thoughts. Regarding the Dialectical Notebook activity, I was able to discern what others were thinking through the comments and the diversity of viewpoints that can be had on a single subject. I was able to get inside their heads and critically analyze my own comments. It helped me to see things more clearly.

The Dialectical Notebook fosters community building by providing a shared platform for individuals to exchange diverse perspectives and ideas. Through the collective sharing of thoughts and reflections, it creates a communal space that encourages mutual understanding, dialogue, and the cultivation of a shared intellectual environment. With the observations and critical thoughts of each, we can receive and analyze and try to solve some problems raised.

Jephthé MOISE

The Dialectical Notebook activity is an engaging exercise for groups of students to analyze abstract photos collectively. It allows participants to share their interpretations sequentially, fostering critical thinking and collaboration. By passing the notebook around, each student gains insights into diverse perspectives, broadening their understanding of the image and promoting creativity.

This method benefits students by encouraging active participation and enabling them to consider multiple viewpoints. It also strengthens community building within the group, as students collaborate to develop a shared understanding of the material. Through this activity, students develop a sense of unity and respect for each other's contributions, creating a supportive learning environment.

8.2 QUESTIONNAIRE

To corroborate the assertion conveyed in this essay, I created a questionnaire, a bit like a sense of community index, that contains fourteen statements to assess my students' experience with the Dialectical Notebook, and to collect their opinions as to whether or not they feel or believe that it truly fosters a sense of community.

Thus, we would conclude that the Dialectical Notebook fosters a sense of community if each student checks more TRUE boxes than FALSE boxes for the statements in the questionnaire. Thus, 17 students had to reply to 14 statements for a total of 238 possible answers. Those 17 students are all part of one class and they have been my students for 2 years at the time the survey was conducted. That survey took place at the end of the second semester, in may. All 17 students in the class completed the survey. Hence, 219 TRUE boxes were checked versus 19 FALSE boxes, which means TRUE represents 92% and FALSE corresponds to 8% of the total, consequently portraying an increase in sense of community. What follows is a presentation of the questionnaire and a comprehensive overview of the analytics of the students' responses.

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

See Appendix 1 ^o

- 1 The Dialectical Notebook allows me to find my sense amid the upheaval moments of the country.
●●●●●●●●●●●●○○○○○○
● TRUE: 11 ○ FALSE: 6
- 2 I experience an extended feeling of connectedness when I am doing the Dialectical Notebook with my peers.
●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
● TRUE: 17 ○ FALSE: 0
- 3 The Dialectical Notebook creates in me a perception of belonging that makes me feel good and safe.
●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●○○
● TRUE: 14 ○ FALSE: 3
- 4 The Dialectical Notebook activity has the ability to help one cultivate and develop social skills, such as empathy, assertiveness and team spirit.
●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
● TRUE: 17 ○ FALSE: 0
- 5 The Dialectical Notebook has the potential to create a perception of similarity to others.
●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
● TRUE: 17 ○ FALSE: 0
- 6 The Dialectical Notebook acknowledges interdependence with others.
●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●○○
● TRUE: 15 ○ FALSE: 2
- 7 The Dialectical Notebook contributes to enable closeness and affection through commitments.
●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●○○
● TRUE: 15 ○ FALSE: 2
- 8 The Dialectical Notebook puts emphasis on the individual experience and perception during social interaction with other community members.
●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
● TRUE: 17 ○ FALSE: 0
- 9 The Dialectical Notebook offers the opportunity for community involvement, empowerment, social harmony, and personality.
●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
● TRUE: 17 ○ FALSE: 0
- 10 I believe that the Dialectical Notebook is an activity that fosters solution finding and positive connections among individual community members.
●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
● TRUE: 17 ○ FALSE: 0
- 11 I do believe that the Dialectical Notebook offers me a platform to freely express my thoughts for my voice to be heard.
●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●○○
● TRUE: 16 ○ FALSE: 1

- 12 I can affirm that doing the Dialectical Notebook positively impacts my engagement and my motivation to work as a student. ●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●○
● TRUE: 15 ○ FALSE: 2
- 13 The Dialectical Notebook has the favorable effect on my learning and plays a role in shaping and sustaining the way I perceive collaboration and living in community. ●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●○
● TRUE: 16 ○ FALSE: 1
- 14 The Dialectical Notebook provides me with what I need to contribute to community development. ●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●○○○
● TRUE: 14 ○ FALSE: 3

9 CONCLUSIONS

When I take some time to reflect on the benefits of the IWT practices in my teaching context, the reasons for me to be grateful are several. Let me explain.

For one thing, I must state that the IWT practices have deeply and positively influenced my work as a teacher, in that they have contributed to moving my teaching experience to the next level, instilling in me the drive I lacked to make learning fun and meaningful for my students. For a very long time I believed that my job as a teacher was to prepare students for something. However, my experience as a CLASP Fellow implementing the IWT practices in my classroom has made me realize that my real job as a teacher is instead to help students prepare themselves for anything.

For another, the IWT practices have impacted my students' engagement and motivation to the extent that they are making use of several of them in their own activities to sustain agency and metacognition, ranging from writing from images to gallery walk. For instance, the student committee organizes this weekly event where a large chunk of the student community gather to discuss various issues related to the country. On these occasions, they make use of writing from images, the gallery walk; and when the conversations turn a bit heated, they use the Dialectical Notebook to get the conversation going. That really helps them to reach the goal of the session. Particularly, a major emphasis is put on the Dialectical Notebook as it fosters an insightful sense of community, conjuring memorable moments of learning.

Therefore, having been in such a lucky place to experience all those significant changes in my teaching has brought me to think of all my other fellow Haitian teachers whom I believe are going through the same trials as I used to before my encounter with IWT CLASP. Also, it has brought me to reflect on how most Haitian students deserve so much better than what they are receiving as far as education is concerned, to be taught properly, and to enjoy the benefits of a caring and supportive community. Hence, I am determined to cascade my knowledge in my institution first, and to spread those inclusive, student-centered teaching practices, pedagogies, methods and approaches as far beyond my institution as I can.

At this phase of my reflection, I want to borrow some words from John C. Maxwell, an American author and leadership expert: "Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." That means, education is not merely about imparting knowledge to students, but more importantly to create an environment where they feel cared for and safe so learning can happen and so they can create knowledge for themselves. The IWT pedagogies facilitate that and the Dialectical Notebook accommodates it.

NOTES

- 1 Aziza 2024
- 2 Elbow 1973, p. 5
- 3 www.uhelp.net
- 4 McNeely 1999, p 14
- 5 Hyde & Chavis 2007
- 6 Hyde & Chavis 2007, pp 180–181
- 7 Hyde & Chavis 2007, p 180
- 8 Hyde and Chavis 2007
- 9 Lee 2023
- 10 Stroh 2015, pp. 1–2
- 11 Pathways to Restorative Communities 2021
- 12 Said 2024
- 13 Edutopia 2017
- 14 Lewkowicz, 2000, p. 45
- 15 Little, Devitt & Singleton, 1989, p. 25
- 16 Nunan, 1988; Wallace, 1992; Lee, 1995; Peacock, 1997
- 17 Dudley-Evan & St John, 1998
- 18 Guariento & Morley, 2001
- 19 Skehan 1998, p 268
- 20 Whittemore 2019, p 143

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(Google Forms link) <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1ZpY97bqgRnmsV6Ox-4Vdd381DdSjbwG2DLM7EJeJalsM/edit#responses>

QUESTIONNAIRE

Please read the statements below carefully. Each time you read one of these statements, please respond if it's mostly true or mostly false about your experience with the Dialectical Notebook simply by choosing TRUE or FALSE.

* Indicates required question

- 1 Email *
- 2 Name *
- 3 The Dialectical Notebook allows me to find my sense amid the upheaval moments of the country. *
☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE
- 4 I experience an extended feeling of connectedness when I am doing the Dialectical Notebook with my peers. *
☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE
- 5 The Dialectical Notebook creates in me a perception of belonging that makes me feel good and safe. *
☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE
- 6 The Dialectical Notebook activity has the ability to help one cultivate and develop social skills, such as empathy, assertiveness and team spirit. *
☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE
- 7 The Dialectical Notebook has the potential to create a perception of similarity to others. *
☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE
- 8 The Dialectical Notebook acknowledges interdependence with others. *
☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE
- 9 The Dialectical Notebook contributes to enable closeness and affection through commitments. *
☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE
- 10 The Dialectical Notebook puts emphasis on the individual experience and perception during social interaction with other community members. *
☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

11 The Dialectical Notebook offers the opportunity for community involvement, empowerment, social harmony, and personality. *

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

12 I believe that the Dialectical Notebook is an activity that fosters solution finding and positive connections among individual community members. *

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

13 I do believe that the Dialectical Notebook offers me a platform to freely express my thoughts for my voice to be heard. *

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

14 I can affirm that doing the Dialectical Notebook positively impacts my engagement and my motivation to work as a student. *

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

15 The Dialectical Notebook has the favorable effect on my learning and plays a role in shaping and sustaining the way I perceive collaboration and living in community. *

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

16 The Dialectical Notebook provides me with what I need to contribute to community development. *

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE