



Me, You, Us: An Approach to Foster Critical Classroom Communities

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Abstract

This exploratory and introductory paper discusses a community building approach grounded in experiential education and informed by public health models—particularly the Social Ecological Model and population based approaches. *Me, You, Us* seeks to operationalize experiential education within classrooms in ways that are more intentional, just, and systemic. By identifying overlapping principles and leveraging facilitation approaches such as *Me, You, Us*, this work demonstrates how critical, reflexive praxis can emerge at the intersection of experiential education and public health to foster engaged and equity-based classroom environments. The result is a structured, values driven approach educators can utilize to engage complex social issues through collaborative learning environments.

Keywords: experiential education, classroom community, equity, facilitation, critical pedagogy

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1. Introduction

This introductory and conceptual paper discusses an approach to critical community building and equitable classroom engagement grounded in the pedagogies of experiential education. Experiential education and other progressive pedagogies can serve as useful tools for classroom teachers to increase student engagement, foster democratic skill development, and help students co-create knowledge from their interactions with the world. However, experiential education as a philosophy

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and pedagogy has been critiqued as exclusionary (Rose & Paisley, 2012; Warren et al., 2014). The goal of this work is to enact experiential education in ways that are more intentional, just, and systemic by integrating public health frameworks that allow for a broader, more systemic approach. By identifying overlapping principles and leveraging facilitation tools such as *Me, You, Us*, this article demonstrates how a critical, reflexive praxis can emerge at the intersection of experiential education and public health. The result is a structured, values driven approach for engaging students in complex social issues through learning grounded in community. This paper seeks to introduce *Me, You, Us* as a facilitation approach and to present case study examples of the approach in action.

We enter this work as committed experiential education practitioners, fully aware that our belief in its value introduces bias. While we view experiential education as a deep, reflective pedagogy, others may see it as lacking structure or rigor. We acknowledge these tensions and recognize our positionality. It is possible that our belief in experiential education's effectiveness predisposed us to highlight examples that confirmed our views. However, the integration of experiential education and public health offers a holistic educational approach grounded in an understanding of power, situated in context, and oriented toward justice and equity. We view experiential education as a philosophy deeply rooted in critical theory, social justice frameworks, and the preparation for life in a democratic society.

Me, You, Us builds on previous work done to propose a model of critical experiential education (Small & Varker, 2023; Small & Varker, 2021), which combines elements of experiential education, social justice education, and critical pedagogy. Critical experiential education seeks to form learning environments that intentionally address power, oppression, justice, context, history, and identity—ultimately promoting collective action to alleviate oppression. This holistic approach emphasizes reflection and reflexivity, intentional design, facilitator competence, well managed risk, theory informed practice, and attention to micro, meso, and macro dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression. *Me, You, Us* is one way to arrive at a classroom community grounded in critical experiential education.

Our interdisciplinary backgrounds frame this work. Our pracademic (practitioner-academic) lens bridges theory and lived experience. Practicing what we study enlivens our research, allowing us to carry theory into real world settings. This nexus of research, theory, and practice informs our work with groups and communities. Reflexive praxis—integrating identity, history, and context—provides a fuller picture of transformative learning experiences.

2. Contextual Framing

2.1 Experiential Education

Experiential education as a pedagogical tradition can be traced to John Dewey, who in the late 19th century challenged the industrial model of education. Dewey criticized the detachment of learning from real life experience and advocated for a model that develops students as active members of society. He envisioned education that would prepare children for democratic participation, emphasizing that students should engage with their communities and reflect on their role in social life. For Dewey (1972/1916), learning needed to be rooted in experience and directly connected to the development of social and moral reasoning.

Building on Dewey, more recent scholars further refined experiential education theory and pedagogy. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory emphasizes a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Itin (1999) expanded on this with a definition of experiential education as a 'holistic philosophy' grounded in critical analysis and learner accountability, where participants take initiative and construct meaning through real world engagement.

Although implemented in many ways, experiential education practices share common elements: authentic engagement, critical reflection, learner agency, and transferable learning. Experiential education differs from traditional education not in form but in intent; experiences are not merely activities—they are carefully designed and facilitated to encourage personal and collective growth. As Joplin (1981) asserted, "It is the reflection process that turns experience into experiential education" (p. 17). Reflection transforms individual experiences into future-focused and action-oriented knowledge that can be applied in new ways.

To an outside observer, experiential education settings might appear unstructured or overly permissive. However, these environments are often carefully scaffolded. In progressive classrooms, student choice and autonomy are embedded within a framework of intentional design and strong facilitation. Educators maintain authority not through control, but through the orchestration of learning environments that balance challenge, support, and inquiry. As Goodman and Kuzmic (1997) note, students learn that "freedom to choose" is directly tied to their accountability as members of a learning community (p. 84).

2.2 Public Health

Public health focuses on promoting and protecting the health of populations rather than individuals. Its central premise is that health outcomes are shaped not only by personal choices but also by social, economic, and environmental conditions. Since the early 2000s, public health has increasingly emphasized a population health approach, which seeks to improve outcomes for entire populations while addressing inequities among groups. This perspective recognizes that interventions limited to individual behavior change cannot fully resolve systemic health challenges.

The Social Ecological Model (SEM) is one of the most widely adopted frameworks in public health. It illustrates how risk and protective factors operate at multiple levels—individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy—and emphasizes the dynamic relationships between people and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; McLeroy, et al., 1988; Sallis, Owen, & Fisher, 2008). By highlighting the interplay between personal behavior and broader social structures, SEM encourages interventions that address both individual needs and systemic conditions.

Other public health models further contextualize the field's focus on equity. Camara Jones' 'Cliff of Good Health' analogy adds a justice-oriented dimension. It describes three levels of intervention: providing health services, addressing social determinants of health, and tackling social determinants of equity (Jones, et al., 2009). Their metaphor of ambulances at the bottom, nets midway, and fences at the top of the cliff underscores how systems must act preventively and structurally to achieve health equity.

Public health is often framed as a systems-oriented, equity-driven discipline. Models within the field provide valuable tools for understanding how social structures influence health and for designing interventions that extend beyond the individual to address root causes of inequity.

2.3 Integration of Experiential Education and Public Health

We see the connections between public health and experiential education as an opportunity to apply systems orientation approaches to learning communities in many different forms. As population level approaches to public health have become more common and widely accepted in the last 20 years, some argue that certain models miss the variability within and between populations that contribute to many disparities at the interpersonal and community level. In contrast, Dewey encourages educators to remain focused on the importance of the individual's perception of the world. Rather

than assuming homogeneity, experiential education reminds practitioners that each individual will interact with the world in a different way and that no two experiences are the same (Fox, 2008). Given that one of the critiques of population approaches is that the targeted populations often have different concerns than those of public health promoters, an essential attribute of a vulnerable population approach would be its inclusion of members of vulnerable populations in the articulation of the problem and the development of the program and its evaluation.

This is not to say that the vulnerable population approach should be the only one to involve the participation of populations, but it emphasizes that participation is a key intervention feature of this approach. As public health practitioners and educators become more aware and interested in participatory, popular education, there is more room for the exchange of ideas and best practices between public health and experiential education.

3. The *Me, You, Us* Approach

We seek to introduce an approach for applying public health models to experiential education in a way that addresses the individual, interpersonal, and community levels of a group in order to support better communication and understanding of others. Called *Me, You, Us*, this approach can be used as a method for creating community commitments, facilitating reflection, or strengthening a group's interdependence. *Me, You, Us* draws on existing community development frameworks from Parker Palmer, Peter Block, and others while integrating an intentional focus on systems-level and justice-oriented outcomes. As an approach, *Me, You, Us* can be utilized in many different educational environments. In the subsequent discussions, we operationalize it as a way to foster learning environments based in critical experiential education and critical community development. As this is a conceptual and exploratory article, it is important to note that our thoughts around the impact *Me, You, Us* can have is based on our experience with the approach rather than empirical data.

Silvia Cristina Bettez defines critical communities as “interconnected, porously bordered, shifting webs of people who through dialogue, active listening, and critical question posing, assist each other in critically thinking through issues of power, oppression, and privilege” (Bettez, 2011, p. 10). Issues of power cannot be completely removed from education—classrooms, schools, and systems are built around structures of power. Embodying a critical community within an educational space can, however, help students more effectively navigate what Delpit (1988) calls the ‘culture and codes of power’. Critical communities built on relationships and authenticity enable students and educators

alike to lean into moments of discomfort and feel supported while navigating challenging questions around justice, identity, and equity. In this section, we will use the terms “groups”, “teams”, and “communities” interchangeably; each of these terms can be traced back to the concept of critical communities. The *Me, You, Us* approach is one option to help groups create community commitments as a way to enact critical community building.

The *Me, You, Us*, approach is versatile and can apply to many groups and teams with different needs. Participants are encouraged to reflect on the topic at hand at the individual (*me*), interpersonal (*you*), and community (*us*) levels in order to recognize what they can offer to a group or team, advocate for their own needs at the interpersonal level, and share their wants and needs from the group as a whole. This approach has dimensions that encourage groups to look both within and outside of themselves in a productive manner. Each of the three levels of this approach engages a different perspective and a different set of questions. While the approach is presented as linear, levels can be used individually to draw a group’s attention towards a specific perspective. *Me, You, Us* is not an established model or solidified framework—it is an approach that can be utilized in a variety of ways and for a variety of potential outcomes.

At the “*Me*” level, participants are encouraged to reflect on themselves at the individual level. What strengths can they contribute to the group? What capacity do they have to support others and themselves in this specific space? What areas of growth do they feel they personally need to work on (that the group should know about)? This level is about their individual actions and behaviors within the group. From a public health perspective, this is the ‘micro’ level of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system and focuses on the role of the individual.

At the “*You*” level, participants are challenged to think more interpersonally. What do they need from others in order to feel successful? What kinds of communication and support are necessary between specific people with specific skills/needs in order to support the group? The “*You*” level represents the ‘meso’ level Bronfenbrenner discusses and moves beyond individual responsibility present within “*Me*” to think about the mutual reciprocity needed between members of a group. “*You*” connects individual members of a group together and begins to think about the reliance they have on each other.

Lastly, at the “*Us*” level, participants can think about community commitments for the entire group. What expectations do group members have for one another throughout the program (and onwards)?

What do they need, on the community level, in order to feel successful and supported from the group as a whole? Representing the ‘macro’ and ‘exo’ levels of Bronfenbrenner’s model, “Us” asks the group to think broadly about the structures, values, contexts, and behaviors that enable the group to be successful.

4. Facilitator Guide

Facilitators or educators can use *Me, You, Us* in a variety of ways, whether to introduce community commitments, as a general reflection or processing tool, or as a tool to wrap up the final reflection with a group. We have included some potential examples below describing how educators might introduce *Me, You, Us* to their groups. We recognize that this approach can be used in many ways and so the language below is offered as a general framing, for individual facilitators to apply to their specific context as needed.

4.1 Community Commitments

“Community commitments are one tool we can use to help us navigate our time together. These can be words, phrases, or ideas that help us establish a foundation for how we want to communicate and offer support throughout the day. Today, we’re going to use an approach called *Me, You, Us*, to help us create our community commitments. You’ll have some time to think on your own before we share out. We’d like you to consider how you’d like to navigate this space at the individual, interpersonal, and community level (*Me, You, Us*), and think about how different interactions will help you feel more or less supported by and connected to each other. First off, the “me” level: what can you offer to the group? What do you, as an *individual*, want to share with everyone today? Next, consider the “you” level; this is going to be more focused on interpersonal interactions. Think about how you’d like to engage with each other today. What do you need from one another in order to feel supported?

Lastly, consider the “Us” level. As you think about your group, what things do you want to bring in from your group culture or dynamic to help you feel supported? How will you know if today was “successful”?

4.2 Final Reflection

“As we talk about the entire experience that we had together, it’s important that we reflect on the ways that we can extrapolate this experience and apply it to your life/work outside of this program. One way that we do that is by framing our reflection with an approach called *Me, You, Us*, where you

get to take a chance to speak to another as an individual, interpersonally, and then also at your community or group level. We'll give you a few minutes to think before people start to share; in the meantime, we'd like you to start by thinking about three things you want to share with the group: first, on the "me" level, what can you, as an individual, take away from this experience? How can you apply what you experienced today as one person, or things that the group needs to know about you as an individual?

Next, at the interpersonal level (the "You" level), I invite you to think about ways that you might apply this "one to one". Think about people that you work with interpersonally in your role; whether that's your supervisor, someone when you work on the same level with, or someone that you supervise. How can you apply the things that we've learned or talked about today on that interpersonal (one to one) level? What parts of our community commitments do you want to focus on in a relational context?

Lastly, I'd like you to think about the group or community: how can you apply these things as a team, as a group, or as a community to the way that you all want to interact and engage with each other going forward after today's experience? What do you all need from each other, on the *community* level, in order to feel successful and supported by the group as a whole? How can you all collectively take this knowledge and apply it elsewhere?"

5. Case Study: Me, You, Us in Action

To showcase how *Me, You, Us* can be used in educational environments, we offer the following case study. The examples and uses discussed here are based on the lead author's experience as a teacher at Sequoyah, not based on empirical evidence.

Sequoyah School, a K-12 independent school located in Pasadena, California, is founded on the principles of progressive, inclusive education. The school enrolls roughly 450 students across all grades. Within the school, the Field Studies program uses the magic of outdoor education and international experiences to create meaningful learning opportunities that help students develop a deeper understanding of themselves, their communities, and the broader world. These experiential, hands-on trips challenge students to think differently, solve problems creatively, and work collaboratively, while also building personal resilience and fostering strong relationships with peers and faculty. The program is a highlight of many students' time at Sequoyah, offering transformative moments that build confidence and promote self-discovery.

All classes participate in one to two trips per year, including kindergarten students, who attend their first Field Studies experience alongside a parent or guardian. As students progress through their K–12 journey, the program evolves to meet their developmental needs, supporting increasing levels of independence, reflection, and group responsibility. The *Me, You, Us* approach is used across Field Studies programs to help students explore their individual contributions, interpersonal needs, and community commitments. It supports the creation of inclusive, intentional learning environments rooted in care, equity, and shared growth.

5.1 *Me, You, Us* at Sequoyah School

“Today we’re going to build some community commitments—agreements we make to help everyone feel safe, supported, and heard. To do this, we’re going to use a simple approach called *Me, You, Us*. This helps us think about how we show up as individuals, how we connect with others, and how we take care of the group.”

Me (Individual Level):

“What can you bring to this group today? What are your strengths, your goals, or something you want others to know about how you learn or work with others?”

You (Interpersonal Level):

“What do you need from others to feel successful? What kinds of help, kindness, or communication work best for you?”

Us (Group Level):

“What should our whole group agree to? What values or behaviors do we want to commit to together?”

Elementary Adaptation (Grades K–5):

Use drawing, storytelling, or sentence starters:

Me: “I can help our class by...”

You: “I feel good when friends...”

Us: “Our class works best when we all...”

Encourage visual posters or charts that the class creates together.

5.2 Final Reflection or Project Debrief

Facilitator Script (Middle/Upper School):

“As we wrap up our time in the field together, we’ll use *Me, You, Us* to help us deepen our reflection. This helps us think about what we’ve learned, how we’ve grown, and how we want to move forward—individually, with others, and as a community.”

Prompts:

Me: What did you learn about yourself during this experience? What are you proud of? What do you want to keep working on?

You: Who helped or challenged you, and how? What support do you need going forward?

Us: How can our group continue to grow together? What commitments do we want to keep or change?

Encourage students to write, draw, speak in a circle, or record audio reflections; offering choice supports diverse learners and engagement styles.

Tips for Facilitators:

Use it often. *Me, You, Us* is most powerful as an ongoing part of the conversation, and facilitation should invite students to change their perspective over time. Providing the language of *Me, You, Us* encourages students to think in a broader lens and frequent use will help. Model vulnerability. Share your own perspectives at each level. This sets a tone of trust and openness. Adapt for age & context. Use visual aids with younger learners and allow for deeper inquiry with older students.

6. Limitations

The research to develop and operationalize the *Me, You, Us* approach was initially grounded in higher education theory and practice. While it has been expanded for and used successfully within a K-12 population, we recognize that this initial grounding can serve as a limiting factor in broad acceptance. We also recognize that this is just one of the many theoretical connections between public health and experiential education. As such, this paper is exploratory, conceptual, and introductory in nature.

7. Implications for Education

As shown in the facilitator guide and case study above, *Me, You, Us* can have broad connections across formal and informal education. Our goal was to use this approach as a way to inform professional practice of educators, facilitators, and others whose philosophical orientation aligns with experiential education. *Me, You, Us* is an approach that can create classrooms and critical learning communities grounded in a critical experiential education framework.

As practitioners and scholars, much of our work is focused on ways that educators can foster spaces for belonging, mattering, and community within their environments. We encourage future researchers to explore the nuances of *Me, You, Us*, including its use in different educational settings and with a variety of populations.

8. Conclusion

The above examples are just two ways that facilitators could use *Me, You, Us* in educational environments. We encourage readers to adjust and modify the approach to fit your group context, specific learning framework, and individual needs, and to understand that this article is merely a guide to begin your exploration of applying public health models to experiential education.

This work represents more than the merging of two disciplines; it is also a call for a more nuanced and justice-oriented praxis that bridges theory and action. Through our pracademic lens, we argue for the value of interdisciplinary fluency: a way of seeing and structuring learning that is responsive to context, accountable to communities, and rooted in reflection. Critical experiential education, informed by public health thinking, does not just enrich pedagogy; it offers a path forward for those committed to equity, systemic change, and community empowerment.

As practitioners and scholars, we invite others to explore the possibilities at this intersection. We recognize that no single approach can address the full complexity of human learning or social change, but by combining the holistic orientation of experiential education with the systems thinking and equity focus of public health, we move closer to an education that reflects the realities of the world we live in and the futures we hope to create.

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