

We Are, Therefore We Think: Fostering Your Own Intellectual Community

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If Descartes's greatest hit was "I think, therefore I am," we think Gholdy Muhammad's should be "we are, therefore we think." "Community" is not one of the four official layers of her equity framework, but because it's grounded in the history of nineteenth-century Black literary societies, community is its foundation. Individual members of these societies did not become intellectuals in isolation; they cultivated their genius in community. Muhammad consistently insists that teachers must practice what they preach. If students "need spaces where they can name and critique injustice to help them ultimately develop the agency to build a better world," teachers do, too (2020, p. 12).

This column's Genius Moves are based on the premise that belonging to communities that we call *hospitable spaces* is essential for your professional growth. Developing a deep understanding of what it looks like, feels like, and sounds like to get smarter together with valued colleagues will allow you to create and foster similar spaces for your students in turn.

GENIUS MOVE #1: Explore space.

Space: The final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before. (Dictionary.com, 2020).

To understand what we mean by *hospitable spaces*, you need to go no further back than 1966 when the original *Star Trek* was aired. If the above words sound familiar, you know that each episode began with

this famous voiceover by Captain James T. Kirk. While it's true that the worlds the starship *Enterprise* crew explored often weren't hospitable to human life, the starship *Enterprise* itself was a hospitable space because it was made up of a diverse group of curious, imperfect people who could do, figure out, and struggle through hard things together.

In this regard, the starship *Enterprise* and the hospitable spaces formed by educators who belong to sustainable teaching (ST) communities share a lot in common. In fact, the central goal of the ST framework, which we've discussed in previous columns, is "creating an inclusive, collaborative **community** that is animated by a commitment to equity, advocacy, and hope." (You can find the full ST definition here: <https://tinyurl.com/342sz88z>.) Like the starship *Enterprise* crew, ST teachers have the similarly ambitious mission of exploring the worlds of schools (which are not new, but *are* often strange!) and creating spaces where students and teachers can "express their ideas, work through justice-centered solutions to the world's problems, and expand their mental capacities" (Muhammad, p. 104).

ST educators initially borrowed the concept of *hospitable spaces* from Parker Palmer's book, *The Courage to Teach*. Palmer uses the term to describe learning spaces for students that are "inviting as well as open, safe and trustworthy as well as free" (2017, pp. 77–78). In extending the notion of hospitable spaces to ST communities, we've expanded Palmer's description to include the features in Table 1, each of which comes with a "given":

voices

TABLE 1. Features of Hospitable Spaces

Features of Hospitable Spaces	Accompanying “Givens”
<i>Generativity and generosity</i>	Given a shared sense of curiosity, openness, and a welcoming spirit, we can DO hard things together. We can be real with one another.
<i>Intellect without pretense</i>	Given that people are smart here, we can FIGURE OUT hard things together.
<i>Emotional buoyancy</i>	Given the joyful toil that is justice-oriented teaching, we can STRUGGLE THROUGH together with hope, healing, and laughter.

To engage in the “space exploration” described in Genius Move #1, we encourage you and your colleagues to use the above language as a launchpad. It will help you (a) reflect on the health of the spaces you already inhabit, (b) keep fostering those that already exhibit the above features, (c) set boundaries in those that don’t, and (d) find or develop new hospitable spaces as need be that will feed your mind, body, and soul.

Translating the above features of hospitable spaces into student-friendly language can also help with culture-building in your classroom. Muhammad reminds us that “[s]tudents need to feel valued and loved. They need to know that they matter to all adults in the school. . . . This means teachers need to create a space of intellectualism where students see themselves as the next generation of thinkers” (pp. 112–13). Toward that end, consider using the above language with your students to build a welcoming intellectual community together.

GENIUS MOVE #2: Convene your crew.

Despite the challenges they faced in their exploration of “strange new worlds,” the dedicated starship *Enterprise* crew made its harrowing voyages successful. By contrast, we’ve been in enough staff meetings, professional development workshops, and conferences over the years to know that a roomful of educators does not necessarily a “crew” make. When debate trumps dialogue, one-upping is tolerated, and there’s an unspoken rule nailed to the unofficial clubhouse door that says “No Laughter Allowed,” such spaces can feel incredibly inhospitable, no matter how intellectual the educators within them are.

Hospitable spaces are categorically different, though. They are generative because the people within them value intellectual humility over pretense. Because these spaces are inclusive, diversity of thought is welcomed. To be clear, the work of teaching doesn’t stop being hard just because the space is hospitable. The load is lightened,

however, because the space is centered on relationships rather than transactions, and hope and healing are favored over cynicism.

Hospitable spaces come in many shapes and sizes and exist both inside and outside of schools. Throughout our careers, some of the “crews” we’ve convened have been small and intimate, consisting of a few trusted colleagues or teacher inquiry groups with curious peers. Others have been more formal spaces, such as our respective National Writing Project sites and state NCTE affiliates.

Hospitable spaces of all types exist at Molly’s school, some of which have emerged organically, like the group who regularly convenes in the school hallway to blend serious shop talk with catching up on each other’s weekends. Others have been more intentionally formed, like PLCs where members can respectfully challenge each other’s thinking. Some teachers have even created an ST group that meets once a month to support their personal and professional well-being. No community is the same, but all have built tight-knit connections over time that exhibit the features of hospitable spaces.

If, like many teachers, you’re experiencing isolation at work (Steiner et al, 2022), we’re guessing that you don’t have access to a hospitable space. What then? In Molly’s experience, sometimes, if you build it, they will come. She has created a welcoming space in her office area with lamps and beautiful pictures that her colleagues have dubbed the “Zen Den.” Drawn to the physical space, teachers and administrators often drop by to connect.

Redecorating may seem like an insignificant step toward creating a hospitable space, but Mohammed advises educators to examine the physical spaces in their school to determine whether they are bright, clean, and organized. Students learn best in spaces where they want to *be*. The same is true for teachers.

If you build a physically welcoming space, and your colleagues *still* don’t come, identify the shared work you’re required to do at your school that you really care

about. Who else is on the ship? A few years ago, Molly was on her school's equity leadership team when their work hit a wall, largely due to problems with social dynamics. Molly knew that she wanted to be part of the solution and suspected that another team member whom she respected wanted to do the same. After a particularly contentious meeting, she decided to take a risk and figure out where he stood. She knew she had to be vulnerable, but that it was also important to protect her own emotional well-being, so she asked him, "I don't want to be on an island doing equity work alone, and I don't want that for you either, so are we in this? Can I trust you?" Luckily, in that moment, Molly's vulnerability was matched, and a hospitable space was formed. To this day, she and her colleague continue to share their needs and concerns as they engage in meaningful work at their school.

Until there's a Bumble app or an option on LinkedIn to help you find and convene your crew, the micropractice we created, called "Trace Your Space," can help (see Figure 1).

GENIUS MOVE #3: Expect turbulence.

Lest it sounds like hospitable spaces are adorned only with sunshine and rainbows, it's important to note that they are neither perfect, nor conflict-free because, well, they're inhabited by people. Exercising all the "givens" listed in the table above requires vulnerability, which inevitably reveals imperfection, both individually and in communities. Furthermore, truly hospitable spaces are guaranteed to have some degree of turbulence, especially when thorny issues and questions related to racism and oppression arise. Although difficult conversations often provoke discomfort, they're necessary to prevent "groupthink"; with personal and collective reflection, they can lead to growth and change. That's why, in formal groups, we devote extended time to developing community norms so that if certain voices dominate or conversation veers off the rails, we can hold one another accountable, review norms, and recalibrate as needed.

Cindy recently discovered that, sometimes, even the norms themselves can provoke turbulence! Coincidentally, as we write, she is midway through a yearlong professional development institute that has become a hospitable space. At the most recent institute meeting, she and her crew of facilitators met early before the participants arrived to quickly review their pristine, carefully planned agenda. As they zoomed through the slide deck that would guide the day's activities, they came to the community norms slide that participants had established at the first institute meeting. The facilitators



FIGURE 1. "Trace Your Space" QR code.

had assumed this would be a quick read, but one norm still stuck out from the rest, which was, "Tackle tension, using *ubuntu* mentality. We are in this together—there is no way but through it together."

The African philosophy of "ubuntu" comes from a Nguni phrase translated to mean "I am because you are. You are because we are." In a brief BBC video (2022), professor James Ogude explains that the philosophy emphasizes that "as human beings, there's a sense in which there is some connection and interdependence. We rely on each other."

During norming at the first institute meeting, a lengthy, whole-group discussion had occurred, regarding whether including the word "ubuntu" was culturally appropriate. The small group who'd made the suggestion contextualized their language choice by defining "ubuntu" and describing how it had been embraced at three of the institute teachers' diverse schools. Because the overall spirit of the norm was important to all participants, a seeming consensus was reached to leave "ubuntu" in the wording. Even though the discussion left the facilitators feeling uneasy, they preserved the wording when typing up the norms in order to reflect their understanding of the community's overall decision.

As the facilitators reviewed the norming slide on the morning before the most recent workshop, however, their nagging uneasiness reemerged to the extent that their discussion was still going on as participants began arriving to the room. No time remained to review the rest of the slideshow since the workshop was scheduled to begin, so the facilitators quickly made the call to scrap the pristine agenda and invite the participants to weigh back in on the norm.

After viewing the BBC video mentioned above to provide more historical context for "ubuntu" philosophy, participants put their thoughts to paper before debriefing as a group. The rich, real discussion that ensued showed an intellectual community at its best, one that resisted

glossing over conflict in favor of weathering and becoming stronger for it. At the end of the workshop, participants shared responses to this question on a Jamboard: “How can our community support our ability to speak out and act when we see institutional and interpersonal injustices being enacted?” One of the facilitators, ELA teacher Breanna Young, posted this response, which echoed others participants made on the Jamboard (see Figure 2).

Without the turbulent “ubuntu” discussion, Cindy is uncertain that comments such as this would even exist; Breanna concurs. In a follow-up conversation with the other facilitators, she shared that even amid the discomfort that day, she remembered thinking, “Yes, this is hard, but *this IS the work.*” Overall, the incident corroborated the idea that the institute is indeed a hospitable space where participants can continue to stretch and grow.



FIGURE 2. Jamboard comment.

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If you find yourself in an intellectual community that experiences turbulence (and you will), we recommend that you consider the reflective questions included in the “Trace Your Space” micropractice so that you can lean into difficulty rather than sweeping it under the rug. It’s the only way to do, figure out, and struggle through hard things together. As Breanna’s Jamboard note above asserts, that’s where change starts to happen.

In the next issue, we’ll offer more Genius Moves to help you sustain criticality in your professional communities. Until then, convene your own genius crew, and boldly go where no educators have gone before.

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