

A Personal Story . . . An Appropriate Place to Begin

My first year teaching I worked in a 4A high school 40 miles outside of Dallas. Third period “Senior Correlated Language Arts” was both a challenging and a fun class for me. I noticed both of these facts the first day when I found myself surrounded by E.J.’s and J.D.’s who lived in houses with addresses that began RR and that had no telephones. Part of me felt like scooping up my little black dog and saying, “Courtney, you are not in Dallas anymore,” while the other part of me wanted to follow this yellow, dirt road knowing I would make new friends and possibly find Oz.

One particular day in this class stands out as a cultural exchange in my mind: Yom Kippur. I was the first Jewish teacher in the school and for my third period class I was the first Jew who these students had ever encountered. Because of this Jewish holiday I would be missing school the next day and I thought it my responsibility to explain this to my students. They were fascinated. E.J. was particularly concerned about how I kept track of all my sins throughout the year so as to ask forgiveness on this one day. J.D. and Jinger wanted me to “talk Jewish” to them. I answered their questions and, that night, left them a note on the board in Hebrew telling them to have a good day.

In reflecting on my work as a teacher, I find that I am motivated by deep humanistic beliefs. I have recently come to realize that the beliefs I worked to instill in my students approximated Dewey's conditions for

reflection: open-mindedness, whole heartedness, and social responsibility (Dewey 1933). Overall I feel as though my goal was to equip each student with the tools to make him a better human being (albeit by my and Dewey's definitions of better) and then to set them free to make their own way in the world.

My Aim in This Sense-Making

In writing this paper, I could easily reflect on those ideas which correspond to my current beliefs and make a whole lot of sense to me: constructivist views of reality, collaborative sense-making, situated learning, practices of modeling and reflecting, and characteristics of individualism and collectivism. I choose instead to explore those ideas that make me wrinkle my brow rather than those that result in my knowing smile.

Conceptions of Good Teaching

Robinson and Stock talk about their work with Gilbert Sanchez and posit:

The exchanges illuminate our conception of a *politics* of literacy even as they illustrate a pedagogy: how a teacher's beliefs about learning combine with her political and ethical commitments - her sense of self and of other - to influence how a classroom community is constituted and how it functions through interactions that take place in it. (288)

While I admit that this statement results in a knowing smile, the application of it to other pieces we read gives me pause. I agree with Robinson and Stock

that a teacher's conception of who she is and what she does rules her actions in the classroom. In my experience, these conceptions are deeply held and not easy to bring up to the surface, yet they remain the modus operandi just the same.

Conceptions of the Role of Culture in the Classroom

While my conception of teaching was to be a transformer who worked to expand and possibly change the beliefs, behaviors, and traits of my students, I find that the prevailing conception in our readings is that of a liberator of students who are marginalized. When first faced with this new conception, I immediately knew that being a liberator went one step beyond what I believed I should be. What I could not immediately discern was how to communicate the differences between transformer and liberator.

At first I looked to the goal the teacher acted upon in the classroom as the difference between these conceptions. Some teachers are only able to acknowledge that their students come from different cultures but are unable to act upon that knowledge. Others go one step further in opening their classrooms to accept all cultures that are present. Still others work more actively to embrace the cultures present. Finally, teachers like those we have read, seek to liberate or emancipate their students from their culturally marginalized position. Are these conceptions of teaching hierarchical? Now that I have been exposed to teachers working in the liberator mode, am I more likely to return to the classroom as more of a liberator? Or is my

conception so deeply and tightly held that it cannot be viewed as a stepping-stone to the next level of cultural enlightenment?

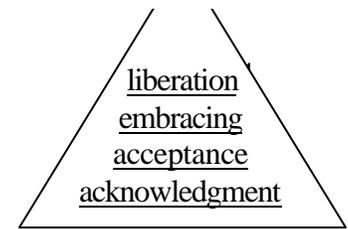


Fig. 1: Hierarchy

Clashing Conceptions

Todd DeStigter also seems to be struggling with this notion of whether he can help his students by accepting their cultures:

I wondered whether my inability to understand completely these students' experience might cause me to impose upon them my own values, whether by my research and tutoring I was encouraging them to act and think in ways that are legitimated by my own sociocultural perspective rather than theirs, whether my desire to finish my graduate degree was leading me to exploit them despite my good intentions. I wondered whether it would be better if I just stayed away.

(41)

I think that DeStigter gets hung up on his role as the teacher and what that means in terms of his students' culture. He is concerned with his use of power with his students, which to me indicates a pedagogical problem. The issue of a teacher holding the keys to the kingdom is, as Robinson and Stock mentioned before, merely one factor determining the politics of literacy in that teacher's classroom. DeStigter senses the disconnect that exists between his "political and ethical commitments" and his "beliefs about learning."

Reconciling Clashes

Many of the authors we read offer their own solutions to the clash that DeStigter feels. Most of them bring in constructivist pedagogical beliefs that are more in line with the ethical and political beliefs found in multicultural advocates. Clifford Geertz acknowledges the importance of context when he writes, “The reach of our minds, the range of signs we can manage somehow to interpret, is what defines the intellectual, emotional and moral space within which we live”(113), and Maxine Greene pushes for multiple conceptions of the same experience, “We want our classrooms to be reflective and just; we want them to pulsate with a plurality of conceptions of what is to be human and to be fully alive”(25).

Toni Morrison, on the other hand, offers a solution by moving away from the various belief systems and focusing instead on language. Like her blind woman, Morrison “shifts attention away from assertions of power to the instrument through which the power is exercised”(12). This focus seems to align all of the other beliefs, pointing to a singular idea to help students work within and without their culture.

Working with Teachers

The issues that keep resurfacing in my work with public school teachers are those caused by the varied pedagogical and ethical conceptions among teachers. Although I am a firm believer in constructivism, I find myself judging other people’s conception of what is best in the classroom. In

pedagogical terms, I feel that the behaviorist approach to teaching is not valuable for students. I have noticed a striking parallel between this issue in my work and the issues raised by this class. Are some cultures more worthy of being embraced and liberated than others? Is it okay for me to ignore the behaviorists the same way that a teacher might ignore the white supremacist student? Furthermore, are there times when individual cultures must yield to those of the greater community?

In my experience, I have been chosen to accept more readily those cultures that center on particular beliefs. I find that I do not ignore or denigrate what I see as cultures based on beliefs with which I disagree. Rather I work to understand the people who are part of cultures based on beliefs that differ from my own I seek their understanding of my cultures and me. Keeping all of this in mind, I will continue to seek out best practices for working with a variety of cultures in one community in the hopes that I may apply these practices to my work with teachers who are part of very different cultures based on their ethical and pedagogical beliefs.

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