

Educator Identity Critical Analysis

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“The best teacher is the one who...inspires his listeners with the wish to teach himself.” This quote from Edward Bulwer-Lytton resonates with me as I think back to myself in high school. I distinctly remember two teachers who made just that influence on me. The first is my World History teacher, Mr. Barr. Mr. Barr came alive during lectures, and I couldn’t help but immerse myself in the worlds of Ancient Rome or Greece, or the war tactics of comparative troops during World War I. His passion for World History kept me captivated for a number of years in his classes, and inspired me to pursue the subject in my undergraduate studies. Mr. Jacobus was my band director for seven years. In those years, I learned more than how to read music and play tenor saxophone. Mr. J went out of his way to check in with me when he realized that depression was hanging over me like an unnecessary umbrella. Mr. J asked me the question that many other teachers noticed and left silent – “How *are* you, really?” Additionally without music as a medium of expression, I wouldn’t have had a vehicle of expression at all. Mr. Barr and Mr. J encapsulated two of the most important characteristics an effective teacher can have: enthusiasm for the subject, and a genuine interest in student welfare.

I am currently in my fourth year of teaching, and I strive to encapsulate those values. One of the most fundamental aspects to successful learning is to engage students in material, because students cannot learn if they are not interested. As much as teachers can tell students to, “sit up and pay attention,” kids might not truly engage unless their individual learning needs are met. Teachers, therefore, need to be aware of who students are as unique learners. I do my best to get to know students as learners by paying

attention to learning habits from the earliest point I can. Of course, I look into things like Individual Education Plans or accommodation lists for certain students as soon as the information is available for me, but I also try to make this investigation more personal about the students themselves. I do this by observing students' behavior, interactions with other students, and, within the first week, by trying to chat with each student individually. Additionally, I give surveys at the beginning of a school year that ask kids questions such as, "What are some things I need to know about you as a learner so I can help you be successful in my class?" and "What are your expectations of me as your teacher? That is, what do you expect from me to help you do your best in my class?" I have found that responses to these questions allow for students to explain their individual needs in their own words. This kind of questioning allows for students to tell me exactly what type of teaching works well for them. I'm made aware of things such as individual personalities, like when kids admit they are shy or work better in small groups, and expectations they have of themselves, like when kids say they learn best when they are challenged or work well under pressure because they know when to prioritize. Additionally, I like when kids tell me the expectations they have of me. This helps me to be consistent because I want to live up to what students expect from their education. I like knowing that students are setting standards to hold me accountable, and knowing what those expectations are, so I can be held accountable, too.

Paulo Freire discusses similar topics in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) as he criticizes the role teachers may take as a fact feeder. That is, teachers often turn to simply telling students what they need to know, instead of allowing students to discover ideas themselves. According to Freire, "Narration...leads the students to memorize

mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher” (p. 71-72). This sort of “teaching” that Freire criticizes takes away any personal aspect to educating children. This process of fact regurgitation, or banking, assumes the idea that “one size fits all” when it comes to learning, which is not the case. As a learner, I hate feeling like I’m being talked at. Sitting through lessons such as this makes me lose interest fast; there is no effort on part of the instructor to engage students in their learning, or to try to reach students on individual levels. Fact spewing takes out the joys of education, such as discovery, recognizing individual learning styles and abilities, and active student involvement in constructing meaning. If students are disengaged in material, their learning needs are not being addressed. Students need to be interested in the material and find it relatable/applicable to their own lives, or they will not grasp the intended concepts.

In this banking system of education, the teacher possesses all the knowledge. Such a system does not allow for students to engage in the process of discovery that leads to knowledge acquisition. According to Freire, teachers in these systems put themselves on a higher level than their students. “Knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable to whom they consider to know nothing” (1970, p. 72). This mentality does not allow teachers and students to bond, which is one of the aspects about teaching that I love most. Forming positive student relationships plays a huge part in successful learning, and that just isn’t possible if teachers consider themselves to be smarter and, overall, better than the students they teach. Additionally, the banking system of education takes away the process of inquiry, which is integral to meaningful learning. When students are allowed to explore topics instead of just

memorizing them, their opportunities to learn multiply. Instead of being “docile learners,” it is important for students to be “co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire p. 81). Instead, teachers need to focus on creating inquiry lessons that allow for both student and teacher to explore possibilities. When students are given ideas or problems to solve and work through, critical thinking skills are activated and strengthened. Whether it’s reflecting on ways in which literature influences society, or conducting experiments to test hypotheses, students need direct involvement; they need to actually *see* the outcomes of a process.

Methods of content delivery have a direct correlation with student engagement and performance. I can tell when my students are disinterested in a topic that is mostly delivered by me in lecture style because work turned in is often unimaginative or doesn’t quite meet the expectations I thought I had communicated clearly. However, when I give students choice in material/activity, they perform much better. As I teach primarily ninth grade subjects, I know that to sit in a chair for 56 minutes can be very tedious on developing minds. It is my job, therefore, to make that number of minutes engaging, useful, collaborative, and worthwhile. Simply put, the banking system of education does not work as a way to truly assist students to become life long learners and explorers.

I knew I wanted to be a high school teacher long before I studied the profession. This profession, in my opinion, is one of the most rewarding, satisfying positions in our society, and I cannot imagine myself doing anything else. To work with, influence, and guide high school students gives me more satisfaction than I even imagined. As much as the politics, the assessments, the state mandated criteria get in the way, I’m blessed to say that I love what I do. As Bell Hooks dictates in *Teaching to Transgress*, “To educate as

the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred” (1994, p. 13). Students need teachers who love the art of education, and want to share that love with the next generation. Hooks echoes Freire, as they call for educators who want to enlighten students to think as individuals, instead of creating automatons that have no ability to think critically and uniquely. Educators in a position to influence minds, and those who do not take that position seriously do a serious injustice to the youth they work with. The world needs educators who go into the profession understanding the responsibilities they have to guide students toward building their unique ideas, mindsets, and views of the world. To be educated means that a person understands how he/she wants to leave a mark on society, and it is up to educators to help every student reach that vision.

Teachers who fit this mold approach education with the desire to help students reach their full potential. I have always believed that for students to want to learn, they have to feel safe in their environment. This requires that teachers make the effort to create an environment that is safe and welcome for all. Students need to know that their opinions and ideas are welcomed, encouraged, and valuable, and that they are important components to a community of learning. As Hooks points out, teachers need to, “[Make] the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute” (1994, p. 39). For this philosophy to be successful, teachers need to be proactive in establishing such an environment. Teachers need to make sure that when students participate, they are encouraged for bringing forth ideas, not criticized for presenting an “incorrect response.” When students feel like they are being judged on a scale of right or

wrong, they may feel less inclined to participate due to the pressure of such a judgment. This leads to silence in a classroom, which does nothing to foster learning. As Hooks says, “What we all...share is the desire to learn” (1994, p.40) Once students realize that they are encouraged to participate in a classroom setting, everyone engages in shared building of knowledge.

As Pratt and Collins highlight, educators have various perspectives to consider when guiding students towards independence and autonomy. One of the key perspectives is one of nurturing, which states, “Effective teaching assumes that long-term, hard, persistent effort to achieve comes from the heart” (Pratt and Collins, n.d.). Teaching is a profession that requires emotional investment in students, and the belief that all individuals have the ability to learn. Many times, students come from backgrounds or situations that do not encourage characteristics such as grit, curiosity, or even desire to appreciate an education. In such situations, it is up to the teacher to help students reach the potential they do have. To value education is a mindset that is not fostered with the snap of a finger. Instead, students need to feel safe in an environment, and need encouragement and support to build confidence in their abilities. For me, one of the prizes of this profession is watching a student overcome obstacles that may impede successful learning opportunities. It could be as simple as a student completing a difficult task, or working hard to balance family issues with consistent school attendance. When students realize their ability, they realize that they are capable of success, which is a beautiful thing to witness. This aligns with how Hooks encourages that teachers recognize what makes this profession sacred, because, in my experience, watching students blossom and rise above conditions that could drag them down is truly amazing.

The face of education has changed and will continue to change. If a teacher is not prepared to grow and adapt their teaching style, then their students will suffer. In my four years of teaching, I have taught in two districts, three school buildings, and nine different courses. I have taught every age from 7th to 12th grade, and was once transferred from a high school to a middle school with three days to prepare. I have worked with students of various levels of English proficiency, and interacted with languages across Central and South America, Asia, and Europe. I have taught students with a range of social and cognitive impairments, and experienced a wide breadth of the Autism spectrum. There have students who have made me cry in class, and students who are gifted to a point that they are on levels far above me. Through all of this, I have not lost the passion or tenacity this profession requires. Instead, I continue to allow myself to learn, to grow, and to prepare myself to be the very best I can be for my students. At times, it feels like the education is filled with only uphill battles and challenges. However, Paulo Freire recognized that if challenges aren't overcome, then educational opportunities remain stagnant. In 1970, Freire realized that when students overcome challenges, they learn: "Their response to challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings" (p. 81). In the year 2017, it may feel like this profession is only one big challenge. If educators can't adapt to challenges, they will not be able to help their students do so. As I think to the future, I know that I will face more obstacles, backlash, and difficulties. However, I have shown myself how to make the best of situations I am presented with, because above all, I always have, and always will, hold the well being of my students as first priority.

References

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