

Exploring Possibility

Challenging Curriculum, Students, and Teachers to be Engaged and Critical

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I BEGAN TEACHING an established children's and young adult (YA) literature course in the Teacher Education department at Michigan State University in Spring 2009. The course centered on introducing students to literature "as literature," developing competence in structural understanding of Literature (e.g., third-person, historical fiction, episodic narrative) and engaging in literary analysis and discussions. Students in, or aspiring to be in, the Teacher Education program consistently comprise the bulk enrollment in the course, but students also enroll from disparate disciplinary homes, including marketing, advertising, English, and psychology.

The curriculum included a capstone Library-Bookstore Assignment, designed for students to explore the different ways libraries and bookstores construct "literature" (and "childhood," "reading," and related concepts). The assignment proved interesting and worthwhile if scaffolded and if students were pushed. However, students in my first two sections of the course in Spring 2009 produced generally lackluster products that evidenced neither student investment nor critical engagement with the concepts and the environments. Perhaps not a problematic outcome for some teachers, but I believe that the modern world "requires people who are critically reflective and can make careful distinctions, who can troubleshoot and solve problems, who have an interpretive, analytic edge, who are willing to stop and ponder"—and that formal education, especially for those interested in becoming teachers in formal education, is a fundamental site in which those sensibilities should be formed (Rose, 2009, p. 62).

I saw an inherent and pragmatic function of the assignment (and the course) as starting preservice teachers practicing investment in and critical interrogations of learning environments (e.g., their classrooms, how their classrooms construct reading). These interrogations are something they would be doing in internships and future classes while reflecting on lessons and watching their pedagogical performances in videotaped classes. I found a similar argument for students in other majors—in what professional capacity will it not be worthwhile to interrogate

one's context, if for nothing more mundane than to find the best coffee or time to visit the restroom?

The assignment should have also pushed students to explore the political dimensions of the course. However, students did not implicate themselves in perpetuating various forms of misinformation and potential bigotry. They argued, implicitly and explicitly, that we had reached relative "equality" while sitting in elementary education classes filled overwhelmingly and disproportionately with White, Midwestern, American, Judeo-Christian, middle-class, female, heterosexual, physically and mentally able individuals. Some openly reified problematic dichotomies and tropes (e.g., that you are a man or a woman and that a "man" is defined by a fixed masculinity). Many disliked any critical interrogation of childhood or the products of childhood. Further embodying the collective interest in social reproduction from these students and their responses, they almost pervasively sought to categorize everything within known paradigms and to resist any challenge to those paradigms. Students saw little problem with censorship, consistently labeling content either "appropriate" or "inappropriate." A picturebook, then, might be "appropriate for 4th grade, but not for 5th," as if there is any immutable or definable "appropriate" or "4th grade." Despite course materials asking them to consider their dispositions toward genre and format, many held and retained unwarranted and problematic stigmas (e.g., that poetry is formulaic and difficult, that comics are all about superheroes, that picture books are all juvenile), sometimes paradoxically (e.g., being serious fans of the novels in the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* worlds but thinking the fantasy and science fiction genres are nonsense or uninteresting and male). Perhaps most troubling, students generally refused to question their faith in the narrative of meritocracy.

The most pragmatic reason that any of these student dispositions matter—schools throughout the US face extremely poor teacher attrition. For instance, one-third of new teachers leave teaching after just three years and almost half leave after only five (Bacon Dickson, 2006). The situation is far worse in urban centers, where the majority of new teachers are placed and find work (de Vise & Chandler, 2009). There, half leave by their third year (Bacon Dickson, 2006). Teachers are faced with great scrutiny through standards, evaluations, set curricula, and NCLB terminology like "adequate yearly progress." While it might be argued that the black-and-white world under NCLB (e.g., "quality teacher" with "best practices") aligns with the students' dispositions I've described, the attrition rate suggests that new teachers are facing situations that don't neatly map onto their idealized and unquestioned experiences and expectations (or when these new teachers face "disillusionment," per Moir and Stobbe [1995]). The tough critical work I ask students to do, for instance, when thinking about the skewed and episodic literary and historical vignettes of Hellen Keller and Adolf Hitler (or the ways in which both were socialists) or when discussing the façade of social progress in *The Princess and the Frog* is fundamentally no different than the critical work new teachers need to do when faced with the myriad challenges to their expectations. Refusing to think about how the only Hellen Keller they know (i.e., an angelic icon of overcoming one's disadvantages through hard work) helps indoctrinate them into faith in meritocracy has implications for how likely these students-turned-teachers are to consider, address, and overcome professional and personal challenges in classrooms and political school environments. Significantly, the implications of this phenomenon (and how my curriculum and its effectiveness contributes to or disrupts it) go well beyond small or immediate communities, too, since Michigan is also a site that exports teachers.

Indeed, as Simpson (2010) writes, "While calls for agency, critical questioning, and liberatory pedagogy are frequent among cultural studies and critical pedagogy scholars, analyses

of the complexities that emerge in actual practice...are less routine" (p. 178). Like Simpson, I see a need for more practitioner-level discussion. What follows, then, is not simply the chronicling of a curricular revision but a detailing of the needed, actual, lived experiences of a teacher trying to push students to critically engage the world.

Making Change

With the course being so popular—six to eight sections are filled each term—and with the Library-Bookstore products I received being similar in their superficiality, I felt a responsibility to revise or remove the assignment. I was also concerned about the potential for cross-section and cross-term recycling of projects. Thus, I started considering ways students could find rich inspiration through this assignment, ways they would seriously invest, ways to connect them with the intrinsic motivations they each individually held for teaching, reading, kids, literature, and more. I wanted to offer the possibility of something more genuine and more authentic. At the same time, I needed the new assignment to provoke students to implicate themselves in the politics of the course, of schooling, of teaching, and of thoughtless or dogmatic social reproduction.

During Summer 2009, drawing from my experiences with and understanding of authentic tasks, critical and postmodern and post-structural literary theory, new and multimodal literacies and ways of knowing (i.e., with modern shifting and constructed "Truth" students should be allowed to and encouraged to contribute to and interpret the world in their own, nuanced ways), I devised and minted the Application Assignment (AA). At the most fundamental level, the AA abandoned the environmental framing of the Library-Bookstore Assignment. Instead, I asked the students in my fall sections to identify concepts derived from course content that interested them and to find ways to "apply" those concepts outside the course. The explicit rationale—explore concepts you're (intrinsically) motivated to explore and authentically learn something while applying concepts outside a three-hour block in a particular seminar room during a particular university term. I explained that while this kind of assignment might originate from student questions or reactions, it should produce learning but wouldn't likely produce "answers." Further, students were encouraged to implicate themselves in the political, to uncover, concede, and address dispositions they held that could be destructive in their future classrooms.

I also pushed myself to enact a similarly critical curriculum and pedagogy. Examples of the varied points in this curriculum, the concepts that may have inspired students: multimodality, hybridity, branding, genre and format stigmas, locating "diversity," didacticism in literature, reader deconstruction, quality in literature, teacher and classroom book collections, global markets and literature, reading incentive programs, and censorship. More traditional and structuralist components of literature remained, and students may have been compelled by the literary or artistic styles in Gaiman or Scieszka, for instance, or may have attempted to locate the conventions of a genre or to define the borders between one genre and another. The curriculum certainly included discussions of libraries, bookstores, homes, and schools, and I welcomed students genuinely interested in critically interrogating these environments. The course also varied interaction and valued different ways of interpreting the world, so for the AA, students could work in groups or alone.

Outcomes

After Spring 2010, and a full academic year of the AA, I'm impressed with the amount and depth of student investment, especially in comparison to that from the Library-Bookstore Assignment. While the openness of and autonomy required in the AA challenged students, many vocalized appreciation for the opportunity to do this kind of learning and supported the notion that the AA is more student-driven, diverse, and authentic than the Library-Bookstore Assignment. Based on their projects, students were also extensively invested in critical, political questions. While not necessarily informed by study of corresponding paradigms, some AAs spoke to major arguments in feminism, critical race theory, critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and more.

Compiling the AAs from Spring 2010, students focused on issues in three major areas: advertising and marketing, literature in education, and questions about literature. The AAs are detailed within those areas below. I suggest that they embody a rationale for making similar types of changes, ones that radically reimagine curriculum.

Advertising and Marketing

One group thoroughly examined four bookstores, focusing on who selects the books and using what criteria, politics and nuances of independent and corporate stores, store design, and point-of-sale considerations. Two groups engaged advertising and marketing in the publishing industry. They mixed statistical data and more qualitative findings, differentiating between types of publishers and explaining what they uncovered about how publishers market (especially to libraries). Points that made their peers think included how corporations no longer need to design mascots (e.g., Tony the Tiger) since media branding does it and does it more effectively for them. These students also worked to find, contact, and interview different individuals with publishing houses. Finally, a group in this area examined marketing in schools, moving from incentive programs (e.g., Book It) to educational branding (e.g., Discovery Education packages) and to funding and the corporate sponsorship that can now be seen on school websites, fliers, campuses, and busses.

Literature in Education

Two students pursued AAs closely tied to their fields, one exploring the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and how literature is and might be used in special education and her peer exploring effective uses of literature in counseling and psychology. One group brought in books used in and pictures from read alouds they attended at local libraries and bookstores, interrogating not only the task but also the setting (e.g., asking what this specific area does to promote interaction with the reading). Another student explored four libraries and the services they provided for children in an AA he centered around libraries and literacy. One group of students pursued questions of format and reluctant readers in videotaped case studies with children. In perhaps the most overtly "unanswered" AA, these students were (rightly) left with many subsequent and continuing questions (e.g., Why did "Julie" think the Holocaust was "history" but that Japanese internment was fiction?). The implications for education spilled into

another student's AA. In a complex and timely analysis of room geographies, pedagogies, curricula, and assessments, she pragmatically considered how several teachers at different elementary schools organize and use books. She also showed the course reading and assessment textbooks and book sets that complimented several of the advertising and marketing AAs.

Questions About Literature

Within this broad third area, several students and student groups considered genre and format. Two student AAs focused on biographies for children: what sorts of individuals children are exposed to through biographies, how famous characters (e.g., President Barack Obama) are treated across biographies, and the availability of biographies, especially when compared to other genres, at retailers. Similarly, a group looked into nonfiction and biography across format, and went to three elementary school teachers to survey them on perceptions of usefulness and interest in the formats. The availability and type of comics and graphic novels in bookstores and libraries fueled another group's AA. They standardized a method, and went about questioning what employees of bookstores and libraries and the locations themselves said about this format, ranging from giant corporate retailers (e.g., a Walmart Supercenter) to independent booksellers and small libraries. And one student group conducted an intense look at modern hybridity in literature, focusing on an "adult" memoir that had been "adapted" for the YA market and into a children's picturebook—and what had been gained and lost, if anything, across formats and markets.

Students also showed interest in how literature represented cultures and diversity. One student compiled and analyzed fairy tales in picturebooks and chapter books across and within cultures, for instance, while another addressed some of the most salient and complex issues in gender indoctrination through books. The cultural tropes in mainstream and popular children's literature directed one group's AA. Other groups pushed against those tropes, grappling with cultural diversity in literature, including what makes a book authentically "diverse" and what "diversity" looks like in libraries and bookstores. Three students in one group engaged literature for children with disabilities and special needs, in part with an activity that immediately and effectively positioned their peers as students with serious difficulty understanding. Like many of the students, they brought in a collection of books as examples, using them also to highlight the distinction between books *for* students with disabilities, those *about* them, and those *by* them. Further evidence of critical engagement came when the group critiqued the shocking disparity of attention to this issue in the (\$170) course textbook.

The final way student AAs questioned literature was by interrogating quality in particular literatures. Students juxtaposed one another by looking at banned books and critically-acclaimed or Caldecott and Newberry winners. One student's AA tackled Michigan's first grade state standards (the GLiCS) with a wealth of research about the ways Caldecott winners could meet them. Another student focused on fun and enjoyable book series, focusing on the ways literature can and should be used pervasively (and not indoctrinated as "work" or punishment or made equivalent to "school"). She included a wide selection of examples across genres and age-based markets. Building on peers' AAs, one group investigated the merits of audiobooks—as literacy tools for reluctant or early readers, as unique multimedia, and as complimenting text-based literature. Finally, three Teacher Education students in mathematics education brought one of the most compelling AAs. They contrasted the tedious books that typify the math experience for

children with a dozen or more examples of radically different and more appealing "math" books. They also attempted to categorize the types of math literature available for children and young adults (e.g., purely didactic to rudimentary but colorful counting).

Conclusions

As I noted above, I identify with and believe I enact Shor's (see Macrine, 2009) "critical literacy" and "situated pedagogy" to get students to interrogate norms. That said, I encounter difficulty in trying to blur the dichotomies and linear hierarchies while still pushing the students to be critical readers, thinkers, and observers. For instance, an advertising student in my course reported that the Teacher Education majors in her discussion group unanimously disliked the postmodern picturebook *Voices in the Park*, but they all firmly agreed that they would use it in their future classrooms—but she did not, nor did her peers, press into the critical space of *why*. More significantly, a Black student discussed with me being hesitant to continue speaking up, delving into the reader in reader response, because her peers didn't. The students don't share a collective in any way. She wrote, for example, "I could see that the first voice of the story closely parallels the way my mother was when my sisters and I would go with her to inner-city parks and neighborhoods," describing a direct connection to the narrative, one deeply imbedded in the politics of race and socioeconomic status. In explaining to her the value of her voice in class, especially for her White peers who consistently posit universal empathy despite being patently biased, I wondered if my encouragement, following Freire, Shor, and DuBois, was not ultimately more harmful than would be encouragement that understood Washington and O'Hear.

Despite these challenges, I see the benefits of critical, political engagement for the students and push them to see themselves as agents in their education and as agents in molding the future. There is a solid foundation for this logic. Kincheloe (2008) conceives of critical pedagogy largely through possibility for the future. Macedo (1997) writes of critical pedagogy as a "path" and a "road" toward possibilities, toward "reclaiming our humanity" (p. 8). Corrigan (1987) advocates the delimiting of "possibilities" and "human capacities" (p. 34). So does Giroux—"enabling possibilities" (1998, p. 2). In titling their work on critical pedagogy, the same sentiment is clear: McLaren (2000) uses "pedagogy of possibility" and Macrine (2009) offers "hope and possibilities." Again aligning with Simpson (2010), removing the Library-Bookstore Assignment and creating the Application Assignment, then, was not just about one piece of the curriculum of this particular course. Nor was my pedagogical shift simply about one teacher's ideologies. Instead, I see this as a statement "that emerge[d] in actual practice" about what's possible when teachers and students come together, invested and engaged, to create and share in genuine and authentic learning (Simpson, 2010, p. 178). And when students are not only engaged in these ways but also in implicating themselves and addressing the political dynamics of schooling, we can expect to see better futures for education.

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