



Places of Belonging: Awakening a Zone of Complacency

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Every child born into the world should be looked upon by society as so much raw material to be manufactured. Its quality is to be tested. It is the business of society, as an intelligent economist, to make the best of it.

Lester Frank Ward, *Education*, c. 1872.

Introduction

Although education has seen trends of progressive ideologies that promote student and teacher empowerment (Ayers, 2011; Lyons, Catalozzi, & Benson, 1998; Spring, 2008), the dominant educational discourse mirrors a business model of efficiency expressed by the social economist Lester Frank Ward (1872). Evidence of contemporary education replicating an industrialized manufacturing society can be seen in the recent Race to the Top (2009) incentives, No Child Left Behind (2002) requirements, teacher abilities tightly linked to standardized test scores (Nichols & Berliner, 2007), and courses in the arts and humanities dropped from the curriculum (Slouka, 2008). I argue that these practices can hobble teachers and anesthetize students, in particular teacher candidates who sit in the *zone of complacency*. This is a zone that acts as an impervious field against questions, uncertainty, and risk.

Curriculum and pedagogy that are tightly tied to predetermined products, such as standardized test scores and scripted lesson plans, separate aesthetics from learning and entrap students and teachers within a discourse of sterilized neutrality. In my courses, I use art to challenge the factory model of learning and invite the dispassionate learner to link their understanding to their significance in the world and relationship to others.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a path that might help reframe curriculum to include personal context and in so doing pierce the zone of complacency. I share my *Places of Belonging* assignment not as a solution to the complex problems in education, but as an offering to call into question the ideologies that emphasize a factory model view of education where student and teacher achievement is measured as a static product (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). My goal is to place emphasis on the human being as teacher and learner.

I begin with my background as an educator and then describe my account of experiencing student examples of *Places of Belonging*. Literature is reviewed throughout the paper and the narrative takes a central position. Following the student examples, I detail the particulars for the assignment including objectives and outcomes. I then discuss the use of art as a tool to integrate the dualism of modern culture, which seeks to separate the aesthetic from the world of ordinary experience (Dewey, 1934). In conclusion, I make an appeal to communities of education to interrupt ideology that casts students as "...raw material to be manufactured" (Ward, 1872, p. 132).

Background

When I began my career as an educator 35 years ago, democracy, empowerment, social justice, and freedom called me to the teaching profession. I fully believed that the purpose of education was to enhance human dignity for all human beings. Greene (1988) captured an essential intention for education that is still part of my educational mission:

It is through and by means of education that...individuals can be provoked to reach beyond themselves in their intersubjective space. It is through and by means of education that they may become empowered to think about what they are doing, to become mindful, to share meanings, to conceptualize, to make varied sense of their lived worlds (p. 12).

Such a space requires an invitation within a safe environment to articulate multiple perspectives and experiences or realities. This aim for education cannot be fulfilled through a linear perspective that requires one answer reduced to a bubble on an answer sheet.

I teach education courses to students from all content areas (i.e., science, English, history, art, etc.) in their junior and senior years in college. They are interested in becoming teachers in secondary schools. As I look upon the faces of the teacher candidates in my courses each semester, I am convinced that the banking system of education (Frerie, 1970) of teachers depositing information to students as if they were empty vessels is alive and well and thriving on our college campuses. A dominant discourse for teacher preparation that I encounter is one of “tell me how.” This desire to only focus on how to teach is represented by recipes for teaching and fits within an efficiency model for education that comes prepackaged.

If we buy into a business model for teaching and learning that is focused on creating consumers and an educational system that is bent on transmitting knowledge, we are culpable in reinforcing a zone of complacency. It appears that our students have been detached from their roots, their curiosity, and their humanity. They are spectators to their own education and are prime targets for complying with fear based educational policies that leverage test scores against job security.

Student Examples

In each of my teacher preparation courses, I devoted the first 5 minutes of class to *Places of Belonging*. This assignment required students to use the arts to communicate to their peers what is their place of belonging. The concept builds off of symbolic narratives that focus on “understanding human experience. Symbols do not represent lived experience, but rather they interpret experience” (Hendry, 2010, p. 76). It was an occasion to honor what makes each of us unique and similar at the same time. Each member of the learning community (which included me as well as the students) was provided the time, space, and challenge to reacquaint and reunite with the contextual experiences of our lives that remind us of who we are.

In my descriptions below, I offer my interpretation of three student examples of their *Places of Belonging*. These narratives were taken from three different mornings in my Methods for Secondary Teachers course and illustrate a discourse that forefronts personal experience.

Claire—The classroom was quiet. Twenty-five college juniors and seniors sat with vague anticipation as they waited for their classmate’s presentation to begin. All eyes

were on Claire, the student in the front of the classroom, who was laying out artwork, photographs, and other artifacts that represented parts of her life she chose to share with her classmates. She carefully set these items on three tables that formed a rough circle with a small opening like a channel that faced the front of the room. She invited us into the circle to observe the exhibit silently as she narrated a bit about herself. She requested that we stay within the circle as she walked around it.

We learned from her narrative that her position outside of the circle was a familiar detachment from what she identified as most important to her. She explained that this distance from her inner core was something she would like to diminish and be able to integrate with how she reveals herself through daily activity in the world. The 5-minute presentation ended with Claire singing, in an untrained voice, one verse from “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.”

Eugenia—Eugenia was a Navajo student in a predominately Anglo class. She typically wore contemporary clothing with her long black hair pulled back, low, and held with a rubber band. Today, Eugenia’s hair was loose with a shine that reflected the deep hue of the feathers that were tucked behind her ear and curved to the base of her neck. Her long skirt, pleated white blouse, and brown suede moccasins communicated simplicity, beauty, and strength.

Eugenia delicately placed feathers, photographs, and books on a table in front of the classroom while Native American flute music filled the environment with a faint drum keeping a solid heartbeat. She stood at the front of the classroom. She waited for focus, silence, and respect.

As a hush fell and the attention was locked, she began to read in a strong and reverent voice her original poetry about growing up on the Navajo reservation. She talked about the land and how it might appear barren to an outsider but to her and her family this land represented their roots:

*From the midst of the brazen land
Comes a withering smile,
Her smile that accepts
This hostile, barren land.*

—Eugenia Sloan, “My Grandmother’s Land”

Eugenia smiled gingerly as she collected her things and returned to her seat while the students paused from the reading and then heartily applauded. I sensed a connection between her grandmother’s accepting smile and the classroom landscape.

John—On this day, there was no music; there were no personal objects. A tall blond athlete on a basketball scholarship stood at the front of the class. He seemed a bit uncomfortable in his lean lanky body wearing baggy shorts and an orange T-shirt. He griped a well-worn spiral notebook that looked as if it had traveled far in a hip pocket or backpack zippered pouch. The paper crinkled loudly as he opened the book and gently turned to a particular page. He disclosed to us that he was a poet and that most people don’t know this. John told us that he wanted to share with us the first poem he ever wrote. It

happened right after a friend of his died in his arms following a drive by shooting near his high school. John talked about choices in his life and then read poems that invited us to understand his experiences vicariously through words.

The language was raw; the cadence was pulsating; his countenance was innocent. He was telling the truth.

The presentations stood alone as an offering to the community of learners as passage for knowing one another as we prepared to learn about relational teaching. There was little or no discussion following these pieces. There were a few questions to the presenter; there was a verbal thank you, and usually applause as acknowledgment and validation.

Places of Belonging Assignment

These examples shared three features; (a) each used art in some form to communicate, (b) each presentation was condensed to 5 minutes, and (c) each illustrated a place of belonging that is important to the presenter. They described connective tissue that colored a context for who the students are and where they come from. The objectives of the assignment included:

- To find connections between self and our ethnicity, culture, and/or gender.
- To explore personal history and experiential background.
- To investigate values and beliefs.
- To create symbolic artifacts or imaginative performance that communicates the essence of who you are.

Claire explained how she has insulated herself from what she identified as her core and how she longs to incorporate what she holds to be meaningful into how she shows up in the world. Eugenia demonstrated a connection with the layers of home place, her beginnings, and her ancestors. John shared the unprocessed fibers of the belongings he carried in his back pocket. These *Places of Belonging* presentations called forward initial stages of understanding and provided an opportunity to publicly acknowledge our beginnings as we related our personal place to our present continuation of being.

The assignment was an effort to begin the process to reunite ourselves with our culture, our reality, and our passion and then enter into a relational bond by sharing this individual knowing with the classroom community. Although these students come from many different content areas, we used some sort of art including poetry, narrative, dance, music, drama and visual arts (photography, drawing, painting, sketches, sculpture, film) to communicate our places of belonging. The outcomes for the project included:

- A receptive community of learners where diverse ideas can be shared and revised within an environment of safety and respect.
- Recognition and validation of diverse inner cores.
- Personal grounding as well as contextual grounding for the community of learners.
- Relationality with others.

The outcomes for the assignment were not about objectifying or isolating each student; rather, the assignment was an attempt to unify students with a sense of place and relation. Noddings (2002) explained, “The self is a relation. It is constructed in encounters with other selves and objects and events in the world” (p. 116). Through sharing the presentations, the assignment was an invitation to relate to a pluralistic way of knowing. To identify and share your place of belonging required clarity and conviction. The assignment disrupted complacency by encouraging each student to take a stand on how and where they belong. The classroom became a collective of realities. These realities we shared were not externally constructed but originated from within and emanated outward.

Learning should tap into our streams of experience that move beyond the singular self to include circumstantial and dynamic factors composed of historical and cultural context. Information that is related to our place is embedded in our lives. It is who we are and what we value. Dei (2002) talked about spiritual knowing and transformative learning when he said “education should be able to resist oppression and domination by strengthening the individual self and the collective souls to deal with the continued reproduction of colonial and recolonial relations in the academy” (p. 121). The increasing call for standardization in education is a type of colonization that isolates us from our culture and creates visionless individuals focused on adapting to the dominant.

The incentive for this assignment was to stimulate engaged learning and provoke an educational experience that was relational and meaningful. It was to provide an interpersonal and intrapersonal link for each student and the class as we struggled “to affirm diverse knowledges” (Dei, 2002, p. 122). It was critical to know ourselves before we began to open to another’s point of view or reality. An understanding of self was woven into our course work through allowing and validating the personal effects on curriculum. Teacher candidates can evoke their places of belonging in lessons and class environments while encouraging their students to do the same. The cycle of expanding the zone of complacency can be broken.

Use of Art

Dewey (1934) described art as experience “because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ” (p. 19). Art sets a tone of safe vulnerability; collective communion through senses and emotion. Art was an important piece of the assignment and was used as an aesthetic to “temporarily restore the significance, value and integrity of sensuality and the emotional power of things, in contrast to the usual indifference of our habitual and obstructed routine of practical living” (Dissanayake, 1984, p. 37). Art lifted us out of the mundane and transformed us to a process of living. It provided a sharing that was both communal and personal.

The assignment used art as a tool to create a learning environment that encouraged and prompted students to self-analyze and discover connections between themselves and the realities of others. Massey (1997) talked about art as a way of knowing. He described the arts,

as a powerful symbol system, like that of number and language; they are multisensory and engage multiple forms of intelligence; they employ distinctive, nonlinear forms of thinking and problem solving; and they create some of our most powerful forms of symbolic communication (p. 1).

As the rationale for using art as a major component for the assignment, I drew upon Dissanayake's (1988) ethological view of art as "a behavior that has evolved because it was necessary" (p. 34). Her approach to art is "ethological or bioevolutionary" which combined studies of human evolution and the development of culture. Dissanayake (1992) suggested that humans have a biological need for engaging in and responding to the arts. "Recognizing art as a biological need can give us not only a way to better understand art, but by understanding art as a natural part of us, we can understand ourselves to be part of nature" (p. 134). From an ethological view, we as human beings need art for survival. She related art to human nature and speculated that "art is intrinsic to our specieshood—to our humanity..." (p. 225). I used art as a channel to call students home with the prospect to reunite subjective, indigenous knowing with social consciousness. Art delivered us from the zone of complacency by engaging our senses and emotions.

Conclusion

The perspective that embraces a business model for education is committed to efficiency and answers without context. A perspective unencumbered by context breeds a simplistic certainty that offers clarity for sorting schools, teachers, and students into good and bad. I have begun to see the current trends of education as an external authority that reduces the value of personal knowing to a non-descript, neutral, and standardized education experience. Learning can rarely be described as an exercise in compliance and contentment.

There are many ways to integrate the complexity of our humanity through curriculum. The *Places of Belonging* is one example. The importance is not in the activity, assignment, method, or strategy. The power and urgency springs from recognizing the need to critique the current educational trends that separate aesthetics from learning and committing ourselves to connecting to education that can transform. Using art in our classrooms to convey places of belonging can move us beyond a zone of complacency to a community with limitless possibilities.

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