Patriotic Acts: Five Activities for Identity Building

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Abstract: Building a personal identity is a lifelong, thoughtful process that takes into account not only one's race and ethnicity, but also life experiences, relationships, and communities. The process of exploring and evolving one's identity deserves a place in the classroom. Educators can play a key role in supporting their students' in this process by teaching lessons that enhance the skills that are crucial to this process, such as critical thinking, perspective shifting, and reflection.

In these pages, I will suggest a few strategies that I have used with my students to encourage the process of identity building and teach the importance of valuing one's own, unique identity. Many (though not all) of these strategies consider layered, multifaceted identity as something that can be instructive for all children, regardless of whether students are mixed or multicultural. This is because multiracial, multiethnic, or multinational experiences can offer an interesting entry point to understanding and can help us to challenge the notion that identity, in general, is unbendable or unmovable.

When expressing the reasons I love my country, the United States, I often cite my belief that we have so many choices here. I consider our choice to become anything and build something from near-nothing to be the essential underpinning of the "American Dream." I believe that part of what we choose is our identity and that we name ourselves and revise this chosen identity many times over the course of a lifetime. This process of choosing identity involves both peril and delight. It is something that is educative and that requires critical thinking, reflection, expression, and feeling. I believe that all students should feel the freedom to name themselves, regardless of their ethnic or racial identities; but identity building is not something that teachers often teach. I would like to see more teachers, especially in the Humanities, use activities that explore complex identity formation. In these few pages, I will suggest a few strategies that I have used with my students.

The Back Story

In New York City in the 1990s I spoke Spanish often and danced to salsa, merengue, and bachata. I looked Latina and most people assumed I was Boriqua or Chicana. I thought about my mother, who lived in Indonesia and elsewhere in Asia and loved the people and cultures so passionately. I thought about her urging me to make use of my mixedness, to be a bridge between worlds. She envied me for being able to so fully straddle the two worlds in ways she could not. When I moved back to Hawai'i from New York in the year 2000, I found myself claiming my Asian-ness anew. I was geographically nearer to Asia and had been hungry for it because I hadn't journeyed there since my mother's passing in 1995. Upon my return, I claimed my Indonesian heritage because I needed to do so in order to feel recentered and whole. This felt like a natural transition and wasn't jarring to me, but I saw that much of the world around me viewed identity as something unmovable, unchanging, and bounded. The perception was (and is) that we don't 'decide' who we are; we are given our identities.

I became a champion for mixed or hybrid views of identity, feeling that complex constructions of identity would help people to understand that we should have the freedom to choose between ascribed worlds. Some people misinterpreted this as a privileging of mixed blood individuals, but that's not how I felt or feel. I

believe that regardless of individuals' blood and inheritance, everyone ought to have the power to name themselves based on multiple identifiers—career, race, philosophy, ethnicity, politics, aesthetic preference, faith, sexual orientation, and so on. Instead I still find people who are threatened by the idea of being able to approach the buffet of what we are given and choose different dishes depending upon our immediate needs, circumstances, or surroundings. Choosing identities looks like code-switching, like when we switch from vernacular to academic language when we change environments, but just as often means a more stable view of oneself that might endure for years. Regardless, arguing the presence of choice has too often meant that one risks being viewed as insincere or confused: "He doesn't know who he is!" the accuser might say, or the argument might be made that the choice is not real or possible, and that the pretense of it emerges merely from fear of prejudice or a desire to manipulate in situations of affirmative action.

The *New York Times* (Saulny & Steinberg 2011) describes the perception that many multiracial students who are filling in college applications are participating in a kind of gamesmanship, where an applicant's racial identification can increase chances of admission. At her magnet school in Maryland, Natasha Scott, a student who posted about applying as Asian or black on the website College Confidential, typically identified as both races. On her applications, however, she ultimately chose to mark only one box: black. "I think that when you're a stressed out high school senior, you'll do anything that's legal to get into college," said Ms. Scott, 16, who will be attending the University of Virginia. "I must admit that I felt a little guilty only putting black because I was purposely denying a part of myself in order to look like a more appealing college candidate." She continued, "In any case, I think it's up to the individual" (Saulny & Steinberg, 2011).

To be sure, racial or ethnic self-identification might sometimes involve matters of expedience, but the circumstances when this would be so are few. More often a choice is made because of a profound need to belong—to have a community or discover one's voice. The perception that race, or ethnicity, are things we adopt or discard lightly even when we are mixed is erroneous and simplistic. And yet this perception prevails and is one of the reasons people are so reluctant to give others, especially those who are not multiracial, the right to choose or name their own identities.

When my brother Barack Obama ran for president, internet and blog comments argued that he was acting too black (when he was speaking from the pulpit of a historically black church, say); others like Cornell West (Hedges, 2011) and even people on the opposite side of the political spectrum, like Herman Cain, implied that he wasn't black enough (Mataconis, 2011).

I watched as my brother was occasionally lambasted for choosing to identify as a black man, a signal to many that he was denying or hiding his European heritage for political gain. Americans debated his Blackness and in some instances wanted him to call himself multiracial or biracial. Few defended his right to name himself as their principle argument, though there were some who identified with his choice.

In an article in *Huffington Post* (Washington, 2008) US Representative G. K. Butterfield stated that for the president to choose anything else would have been ridiculous. "Let's just say he decided to be white… people would have laughed at him" (Washington, 2008). Still others suggested that his whiteness was the only thing that made him politically viable, implying that his ability to accommodate white mainstream expectations and standards are what make his candidacy legitimate (Coates, 2007).

Some of the banter and controversy was merely entertaining, but occasionally, the vitriol on both sides left no doubt in me that our national love of 'freedom' did not extend to the freedom to name oneself. The need to box and label identities also applied to my brother's localness here in Hawai'i. I find this view unfortunate and narrow. Why shouldn't we want our children to weave comfortably in and out of worlds? Will we ever as a nation fully embrace the unique American beauty having so many more identity choices than others with less complex immigration histories? If we do embrace this idea, then our public schools should be places where students can safely tell the story of their identity as it has evolved

up to the present, thus paving the way for future explorations of self.

A classroom that pays attention to identity will therefore make room for critical dialogue between different points of view. It will be organized on the assumption that a 'good' education is one that might liberate the student from being bound to a single world view or an unexamined world view. It will also assume that a good education will lead to the creation of a more inclusive international understanding and more rigorous multiculturalism. It would invite students of all kinds to find self-empowerment through constructing meaning in their lives and becoming participants in their own identity formation. It must make room for reform, argument, revision, undulations, moderations, and compromises in identity and culture.

The following activities have been designed for use with late elementary students as well as secondary history and English classes. They allow us to critically evaluate, while retaining pride in, our traditions. They use dialogue, reflection, and creative expression to help students grapple with issues of identity. They view history and current events from multiple perspectives so as not to draw circles too-tightly around identity, and rigidly separating 'us' from 'them.' The activities encourage flexible thinking and meaning making and can be adapted for many different classrooms and subjects.

I: The Focused Autobiography

One activity that allows students to look safely at identity is the language autobiography. Language autobiographies invite students to look at their individual and familial histories through language, broadly defined as any system of communication that has a separate set of rules known only to speakers or insiders. Students can explore Tagalog or Hawaiian, but they can also consider Pidgin, the language of formal education, the language of intimacy, or the language of hip hop. Students create exhibit pieces that are displayed in the classroom "language museum." In terms of thematic categories, I ask students to explore their early experiences with language, linguistic diversity and code-switching, students' success with language, students' views on dialect, colloquial language, creoles, and pidgins and, finally, the student's perspective on the adequacy of language for meaningful communication. Students may choose to explore these themes in any way they wish (through poem, journal entry, painting, letter, collage, short story, skit, or mnemonic).

The language autobiography and similar activities assume that the naming of the self is a fundamental democratic right that can help students to understand that language and other manifestations/expressions of culture aren't static and that identity is dynamic, ever changing, and fluid. My students spend some time thinking about other kinds of autobiographies and explore themselves as learners, community members, and more. Students see changes in their own identities and in their relationships and, as a consequence, are prepared to craft statements of culture. They define their personal culture and reflect on what they find to be valuable about tradition and cultural preservation as well as cultural change or evolution. They reflect on cultural and linguistic survival. They debate the question of whether culture is ascribed or acquired (through our interactions, decisions, and geography). Students think about whether individual autonomy is important in defining one's culture. As a result of these autobiographical activities, students deeply question why identity matters and become better equipped to make identity a useful and fortifying concept.

II. The Modified Debate

Students are often asked to debate, but traditional classroom debates often don't allow for shifting or multifaceted perspectives. Even small adjustments in preparation and process make a traditional debate much more meaningful and productive as a means for empathetic reflection and multifaceted perspective building. A teacher can ask students to fully prepare for both sides of the topic; the student is told on which side they will argue and who their partner is on the day of the debates, only fifteen minutes before debating. This leads to greater ownership of a wide variety of ideas and students are prepped for more empathy and less narrowness. The next stage involves

having students, after the first round of debates, assume the position of the opponent with as much vigor and passion as when arguing their original positions. Finally, students could write position and opinion papers that require that they address both or many sides of the controversy in developing their own opinions. Thus, students not only deepen their understandings of the issues but also articulate their identities and position vis-à-vis these subjects. They have to mine their own interiors and take the intellectual risk of moving flexibly from one side to another. In doing so, they are building a more complex identity.

The modified debate is much like Structured Academic Controversy, a nationally known method of teaching controversial perspectives and topics that leads to an increase in discussions and inquiry. The process is not structured in terms of simply pro or con, but assumes in addition that the class, or indeed any group, will be able to negotiate a consensus by first understanding each position more thoroughly. Any period of history is viewed from many vantage points in an effort to synchronize and mediate between opposing sides and faraway unknowns. The intended outcome of this process is that students begin to understand and enjoy greater complexity of cultural understanding.

A related way to increase intellectual flexibility is through what Peter Elbow, in his book *Writing Without Teachers* (1973) calls the "believing" and "doubting" games. These are methods of approaching texts and ideas that require that the student first doubt or approach a text "critically," to look for errors and contradictions and to deconstruct and challenge ideas with hard-headed, scientific skepticism. Elbow believes that the truer it seems, the harder you have to doubt it and work to deconstruct it. By playing the "doubting game," students can come to appreciate their own opinions, assumptions, and inherited positions by reacting against those of another. Then comes the "believing game" wherein the student projects herself into a writer's point of view in order to intentionally and vigorously believe, defend, and uphold everything. The game does not involve accepting or adopting the position taken but rather understanding why an individual comes to the beliefs she or he is expounding and exactly what those beliefs are. It involves reflecting too on the *what* and the *why* of a student's own beliefs to make room for a collaborative and tentative formulation of new ideas and approaches. Students repeatedly shift their understandings of self and other. Finally, students can do what I call the 'sharing game' where they endeavor to climb and combine multiple vantage points in an effort to develop a more panoramic vision and complete understanding of any truth.

III. Media Matters

In high school I used to have to memorize current events stories every week and fill in the blanks on a weekly quiz conducted in the auditorium. No controversy or alternate opinion would be presented. There was never more than one right answer.

I believe that teachers should never shy away from controversial current events, and there is no reason in this day that we should teach and learn current events from a single source. Instead, we can look at English language newspapers from all over the world and learn so much from simply observing the differences in story placement from place to place, or reflecting on the reasons for changes in tone and emotional timbre. Students can examine what is emphasized or deemphasized and learn not only journalistic standards and language but also re-conceive and complicate the truth.

Students can take a local or national news story and change the narrative voice to imagine and honor the perspectives of people from other countries and cultures. They can research other people's views and change the beginnings and endings of a story, writing in the voice of someone from a country or place we don't understand very well. Even domestically, we have media that report very different points of view. We are called on as citizens to evaluate our own and other media in a way that accommodates multiple visions and merges narratives. In this way, students are given opportunities to move away from simplistic understandings of world events and to relocate and rename themselves in a more complex socio-political world.

IV. Banyan Tree Oral Histories

I use the phrase "Banyan Tree Oral History" to describe any oral history and identity research activities that push students to examine multiple entanglements. Students learn how to create case studies and community-based research in order to engage with their families, one another, the past, and home. Banyans are great for climbing, and the roots of the banyan are complicated. It's hard to tell the difference between endings and beginnings. Student oral history projects bring in history from many places and follow it in many directions. Identity formation is ongoing. These projects contain interviews, pictures, art, analysis, and reflection. Students can examine websites like *Tell Me Your Stories* and *Eye Witness History* and teacher resources from the *Library of Congress website* in order to get a sense of what is possible in their own communities as well as what is available in terms of stories, documents, and other first person sources that can help us to make history come alive.

In "Banyan Tree Oral History," students create case studies, learning what makes a subject too broad or narrow, interesting or dull. Students learn to ask questions that are open- ended and layered, and they present partial results for future development. They learn to recognize gaps in their own understandings and discuss possible avenues for future exploration. Oral histories include equal parts information and evaluation, so students think about their identities as situated in the case studies or oral histories. By identifying why a subject matters and why and how a subject can be viewed as representative of larger patterns and concerns, students learn to connect with the subject matter and feel empowered to research and write about individual, community, and identity.

V. Layered Voices

I often use one particular section of the *Facing History and Ourselves* (Strom, 1994) textbook. This section includes an excerpt from author Julius Lester, who writes about discovering his voice in Haiku while browsing in a Tennessee bookstore in the fifties. He was a teen, moved by the honesty and strength of the poetry and in need of inspiration, but he questioned his right to claim a voice and style coming from seventeenth-century Japan. He almost returned the book to its shelf but then regarded doing so as an act of 'self-betrayal,' so he bought the book and began writing haiku and that opened up multiple pathways for him.

I use this passage to remind students that, while it is important to know from whence we came and where we currently reside, we must make room for the layers and passions that cross our paths in unexpected junctures and around unpredicted turns. We shouldn't be too quick to decide who we will become, even though we name who we are at any given moment.

In the activity I am calling "Layered Voices," students have to select an existing piece of published poetry or prose that most closely fits what they consider to be their voice. They write a reflection that asks what kind of voice it is? What is the connection between one's voice and one's identity? What part does one's voice play in shaping an identity?

I pair this discussion of voice with a book by James W. Davis called *Hybrid Culture: Mix-Art* (2007) that looks at contemporary hybrid forms of art like Hip Fu (Hip Hop Kung Fu) and Jawaiian (Jamaican style Reggae fused with Hawaiian music) as well as hybrid cultures from an earlier era like Afro-Cuban or French-Arabic music or Mughal dance. This is a great way to explore the history of migration, colonization, and globalization. Students have to trace the roots of the poem that they choose to represent them before carefully changing the last stanza of the poem to reflect their life's current direction. Thus their selected piece becomes shared between the poet and the student—an artifact not only of history but also of current currents of identity.

This is one example of ekphrastic writing—writing that comments on another art form. Students can move beyond writing too; they can entwine their visions and voices with the poetry, painting, prose, photography, and sculpture of others. Such art lives as a mindful communication between the students and innumerable others. Through art, students learn to watch their inner experiences in communication with others. As an exercise in empathy, this layering of voices prevents intellectual rigidity and allows students to layer their

own identities with voices and influences from all over the world, provided they are moved to do so.

A Look at Mixedness

In all of the five activities, there are opportunities to explore complex identity by focusing on mixed race literatures and experiences. The exercise of considering multiculturalism within a single family can be instructive for all children regardless of whether students are ethnically or racially mixed. This is because investigation of personal multicultural experience can offer an interesting entry point to understanding choice, something more often claimed and discussed by mixed people. The process of identity building for mixed people is less automatic and inevitable and therefore an examination of this process can help us to challenge the notion that identity in general is unbendable or unmovable.

A few years ago, *The New York Times* entered the national discussion on mixed race by publishing a series of articles called "Race Remixed" (2008) that explored the growing number of mixed-race Americans. The series addressed issues such as the growing number of interracial marriages and the many different ways one can define one's own ethnic and racial identity.

In the series, biracial author James McBride, when asked which part of him was dominant, responded, "It's like grabbing Jell-O….But what difference does it make? When you're mixed, you see how absurd this business of race is." Well, it's not quite like grabbing at Jell-O for me as it feels more empowering than that, but his comment reveals a truth about the shifting terrain of identity. It also affectionately conjures memories of my Kansas grandparents' holiday Jell-O mold (with canned fruit, cool whip, and marshmallows). Many young adults of mixed backgrounds have rejected the bounded identities that have traditionally defined Americans in favor of a much more fluid sense of identity. Michelle López-Mullins, a twenty-year-old junior and the president of the Multiracial and Biracial Student Association says, "It depends on the day, and it depends on the options" (Saulny, 2011). If young people feel the need to embrace more than one identity there is literature out there that now encourages multi-identity acceptance even in early childhood.

Children's Book Press has published a number of books addressing the experience of mixed-race and biracial children. *Two Mrs. Gibsons* (Igus, 1996) depicts a little girl embracing and enjoying the cultural differences between her Japanese mother and African-American grandmother. In *Cooper's Lesson* (Shin, 2004), a boy overcomes his initial struggles with being biracial, learning to weave both Korean and American culture into his life.

For older children, the Smithsonian Institution had an exhibit on race that featured the work of Kip Fulbeck and others who take in-depth looks at mixed race. A plethora of resources are available from groups such as Mixed Race America, the Mavin Foundation and the Association of Multiethnic Americans (AMWEA).

I believe that a meaningful understanding of identity must involve students thinking of themselves simultaneously as a product of their family inheritance and as a construction of relationships between self and communities that are both local and global. Such an approach would serve to make students more flexible, more tolerant of ambiguity, and more expansive in their vision. They would be able to identify more readily with others beyond family and neighborhood, and they would think of their experiences and intellectual explorations as a means for growing wider not just intellectually, but also emotionally. In today's "information age" students are already aware of international social and political upheaval. They are sophisticated conduits between cultures because of their agility with technology. They are sensitive to the dramatic impact of the international economy and cultural forces. All of this means that they must construct an identity that is malleable enough to withstand the impact of global commingling and changes that come from life experiences.

It is important that students have access to powerful local motifs and to their ethnic and familial heritage. It is important that educators offer students opportunities to excavate their own backyards and protect identities and traditions that are useful and esteem-building. Students need to be connected to

place and the community around them. The naming of one's self and culture is a fundamental democratic right and a student's understanding of his or her own given identity matters. But we also have to communicate that identity isn't necessarily a static phenomenon; it can be dynamic and ever changing. Students can be encouraged to draw from the best of their ascribed identities, but both formal and informal education can also involve the acquisition of new layers, with students naming themselves in profound new ways as they stretch and grow, make new connections, and prepare to move through adulthood's challenging terrain.

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