

With Love: Attempting to Instill the Lasting Value of Humanity While Teaching During a Global Pandemic

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Abstract:

Given the onslaught of COVID-19, the University of Minnesota suspended in-person instruction, forcing instructors to engage multiple forms of distance learning. This essay describes how two graduate instructors in social studies teacher education shifted their pedagogical focus from one course's content to the ways in which their students would experience their online instruction. The instructors' overarching goal was to model for their pre-service teachers what they hoped would be the pedagogical imperatives in those pre-service teachers' future classrooms: the centering of humanity, the ability to balance grace with high expectations, and the willingness to reflect and learn on their own.

Introduction

In mid-March of the spring 2020 semester, the president of the University of Minnesota announced an end to all face-to-face instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there had been warning signs of the impending changes given the rapid spread of the coronavirus, course instructors felt unsettled because they were expected to pivot quickly from the face-to-face format to some form of distance learning. What we have laid out here are some of the pedagogical moves taken by two graduate instructors—and the lessons learned from those

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moves—for a course I (re)designed several years ago, *CI 5746: Global and Multicultural Education in the Secondary Classroom*. This course originated at the University of South Florida, where I completed my doctoral studies in 2005 and had previously taught it as a graduate instructor under the guidance of my advisor, Professor Barbara Cruz. This 12-week class represents one of the final courses taken in a 13-month Initial Licensure/M.Ed. program in social studies education at the University of Minnesota. Unlike other courses, in which instructors had to pivot from one teaching format to another mid-stream, CI 5746 did not begin until after the university's spring break and after the president's directive. Therefore, it was taught using a distance learning format from the very beginning, but the two instructors had little time to adjust the course before the March 17 start date. Scott Glew and Ryan Oto, two veteran social studies teachers who are also doctoral students in the social studies PhD program, were charged with co-teaching this course and making the changes necessary given the U of M president's new directives. Both instructors have previous teaching experience within our social studies program, and Ryan co-taught this course with me and another graduate instructor the previous spring (2019) semester.

Instructors' Narrative: Laying the Groundwork

As secondary social studies teachers currently working in middle school classrooms, we both took seriously the fact that this was the final course our students would take before they earned their graduate degrees and, more importantly, become responsible for the development of students in their own classrooms. We were positioned to send a group of educators into our profession with the traits that we value among our peers: the centering of humanity, the ability to balance grace with high expectations, and the willingness to continue reflecting and learning on their own. These tendencies are important in any classroom context, but they became even more so when ours shifted to a completely online format for the entire semester.

We never met the students in this course face-to-face. Some of the seemingly peripheral aspects of teaching that we often take for granted—the conversations with students who arrive early or linger, the casual banter during class—are vital components when building community, and they were noticeably absent in this format. Therefore, we deliberately made space for community building in each synchronous class session, where students asked questions and shared what they wanted about both their professional and personal lives. In addition, we left the Zoom meeting open before and after the shortened class times so that students could talk to each other with or without our presence. When our presence was requested, students took those opportunities to engage us more deeply on concepts/ideas that we had previously discussed. These moments of grounding made us feel more connected, but they also took up a considerable

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amount of time from class periods that we had already committed to shortening so our students would not need to endure three-hour Zoom meetings. This meant that some parts of the planned curriculum needed to be cut.

When attempting to teach a course about a topic as important and broad as global and multicultural education in 12 weeks, what makes it onto the syllabus in a normal year is just a sliver of what we would want students to learn. Because the shift to an online format forced us to cut content and activities, we felt that the best way to maintain the integrity of the course was to emphasize big ideas and model the dispositions we hoped these educators would take with them into the years ahead. Wiggins (1989) wrote that “students cannot possibly learn everything of value by the time they leave school, but we can instill in them the desire to keep questioning throughout their lives” (p. 44). That is a lofty goal, to be sure, especially for a short, spring semester course taught in the middle of a global pandemic. As currently practicing K-12 classroom teachers, we were openly vulnerable, sharing our own ongoing development and moments of discomfort, and this move allowed us to credibly emphasize that this course needed to be the starting point for a lifelong journey of learning, reflection, and growth.

Instructors’ Narrative: In Theory and in Practice

This challenging time for students also had to be met with grace and flexibility, as we both felt a strange sense of disconnection from the class content each time we met to plan the next class session. Exhausted from our commitments as full-time secondary social studies teachers, emotionally spent after reaching out to families to ensure their well-being, and disgruntled about the efforts that our public school districts were making to ensure access to food and mental health services made the planned topics for CI 5746 feel less authentic and meaningful in this particular moment. In addition to that, we were routinely barraged by questions about how to justify passing our middle school students if they did not do any work. Many of our K-12 colleagues chose a vision of school as a content delivery system, simplifying the work of teaching into creating content that they could assess and determine whether students understood material. From this position, we routinely heard our K-12 colleagues deem students as failures because they were not engaging in the content. This was especially true for low-income Black and Brown youth. Common refrains began to form as engagement with virtual classrooms dwindled throughout the spring semester: *Is it fair that teachers are working harder than students? The NCAA won’t accept “pass or fail” so we need to do something else. Students can’t just pass classes because we’re doing distance learning; what is the point of school, then?*

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As we shared these stories with one another, we came to understand our K-12 colleagues' commentary on young people as extensions of the deficit-orientations that have long been maintained in school systems about racially and economically minoritized youth (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995). We also noticed that these arguments and questions were rooted in a decontextualized understanding of school; rather than shifting how to think about schooling to account and respond to the global pandemic, these arguments were rooted in maintaining what was known and what had become "normal" school practices. As a direct consequence of this thinking, the pre-existing and deeply rooted inequities in schools were exacerbated.

The more we processed these ideas about our collective teaching experiences at our public schools, the more we came to understand the urgency of centering something different for the students in CI 5746, understanding that it would not be perfect. But we felt compelled to send a strong message that schools serve an equally, if not more, important purpose of maintaining and building a sense of community and well-being among adults and youth. We approached CI 5746 attempting to instill the value of humanity first and foremost, knowing that this work remains imperative across all contexts, and especially those that exacerbate injustice.

Our first class was a lesson in humility. Scheduled to meet for over three hours as a discussion seminar, we tried to host the entire class of 23 students for three hours. In short, the experience was terrible. We attempted to graft what we would do in person onto a virtual context, and by the midway point, everyone was exhausted. We offered a survey to see what students thought, and overwhelmingly, the responses indicated that we needed shorter class times online and more time to "just talk with each other about life," as one response noted. Humbled by the challenge and the honest responses, we decided to reframe the overall course, and we spent time in the next class devoted to getting to know each other better. We also decided to shorten the actual instruction time in the class to two hours. The next week, the grounding took an hour and neither of us were ready for the way this process consumed our time together. As our anxieties about trying to fit content into the remaining hour flooded our minds, what unfolded before us was the formation of a cathartic experience where people checked in, sharing their collective grief and frustration about their lives and offering support for one another. At the end of class, one student spoke up, saying:

Hey, I just want to say thanks for the start of class. I don't get to see these people anymore and it just feels super important to stay connected. I really appreciate that you guys built time and space for that, even if it meant we didn't get to all the readings. (Personal Communication, April 7, 2020)

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Nods of affirmation echoed across the screens, and after this, we continued to work in spaces for people to be together and maintain the relationships that existed before COVID-19. This was a difficult choice because so much of our internal narratives revolved around the importance of the content we taught. Were we doing a disservice to students by not covering all the material? Were we saying that the curriculum was not valuable? We understood this to be our own fears of being judged by those around us, and when we let go of those fears, we came to understand that if we wanted these pre-service social studies teachers to have a critical disposition that centered the humanity of their future students, we needed to practice and model that disposition as well.

Throughout the remainder of the course, a fluid dynamic grew out of opportunities for students to voice how they wanted to engage with the course content and the community. While our pre-service teachers overwhelmingly enjoyed being together, these moments could have easily been wasted by hosting discussions in a physically decontextualized classroom. While we could not hope to control what people felt, we aimed to offer follow-up on their advocacy and flexibility when something didn't go as planned. For example, our last class was scheduled to take place at the same time that multiple peaceful protests were taking place in Minneapolis and St. Paul in the wake of George Floyd's murder on May 25 (Ferraro, 2020). While we as facilitators grappled with what to do or think in our own right, we felt a need to host a class discussion. After sending out the plan for class a day in advance, we had a number of students reach out to us saying that they would not be attending class because they would be protesting instead. Some asked if their grade would be marked down for not attending, which caused us to feel a deep sense of dismay. Given their apparent sense that we would punish them for engaging in meaningful community action to fight for racial justice, we realized that hosting class at all was the barrier that inspired this sense of concern. While being together in class made us feel good and supported our belief that we were fulfilling our responsibilities as educators, it became clear that this was a choice for ourselves, not for those we taught. Understanding the nuance of this balance became critical in how we made decisions about what to teach and when to let go of the reins, allowing our students to learn and take action in response to far greater learning opportunities within their communities at-large.

Concluding Thoughts

Teaching *Global and Multicultural Education in the Secondary Classroom* to pre-service social studies teachers in the wake of our current global pandemic pushed the instructors to locate new depths of flexibility, grace, and humility in their teaching practices. In reading their narrative, we

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hope that you notice several tensions at play: coverage of content vs. allowances for students to connect with cohort members; fulfilling class contact hours vs. shorter instruction time with check-in times built in; adhering to preconceived expectations as instructors in a graduate education course vs. making pedagogical moves in the moment that met students' cognitive and emotional needs. Throughout the 12-week span that Scott and Ryan taught the course, there was on-going communication with each other and with the students in the class, and there was a consistent modeling for their students what they hoped would become common practice in their future classroom spaces: the centering of humanity, the ability to balance grace with high expectations, and the willingness to continue reflecting and learning on their own. What was unsaid but present throughout their narrative is the pressure they likely felt when reframing a course that had been well-established by their advisor. Despite this pressure and their inner voices that often tempted them to reverse course and focus on content only, these graduate instructors created a virtual teaching environment that enabled the pre-service teachers to maintain the bonds that had previously existed among them and later to engage their need for activism in the wake of an injustice felt across the United States and abroad. We encourage other social studies instructors to strongly consider replicating (when possible) the pedagogical moves demonstrated here and to notice the thoughtful reflection that prompted these moves.

We leave you with the final email sent to the class on June 2, 2020, the day that had been scheduled for the final class (virtual) meeting but conflicted with peaceful protests occurring in the Twin Cities in the wake of George Floyd's murder:

Good morning all,

After hearing from many of you, we are going to be cancelling class tonight in its entirety. Your passion to demonstrate solidarity and resistance in our community is exactly what this course is about and we will not claim that our work is more important than what is currently happening. While we considered rescheduling the class, we cannot in good conscience try to plan out a different time given the rapidly evolving dynamic of the protests, resistance, and support efforts. That said, if you want to organize a meeting time to collectively process/reflect, we welcome that and will support that by setting up a Zoom and communicating out times/dates. Please reach out with concerns about specific issues pertaining to the class if need be.

In the meantime, please keep in touch, be safe, and remain steadfast in your resistance to oppression.

With love,
Scott and Ryan

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