**Teaching Philosophy**

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Middle school was a socially and personally awkward time of my life. As I stumbled through puberty, I had to consider the influences of my peers, my family, the culture of my school, and my own developing ideas. This multitude of factors made me unsure of how I defined myself, and made it even harder to discern how I could fit in at school. The fact that I experienced such social discomfort during my early adolescence is not unique, nor is it the defining characteristic of my life story. Rather, the most important moment of my middle school and early high school years was my decision to come out as gay in this socially unstable climate.

Despite the uncomfortable atmosphere brought on by the raging hormones and changing bodies of my peers and I, my coming out process was fairly easy. I had a family who loved me, friends who supported me, and teachers I who I knew cared about me. I discovered the more challenging part of grappling with my sexuality came after coming out of the closet. I had to struggle with the opinions of others, the heteronormative culture of school, and the broader social trends that influenced my identity. At first, I thought it merely encompassed the process of telling people I was gay. I thought the most harrowing part of defining myself as a gay teen would be slightly awkward interactions with new people as I let them know about my sexuality. I would eventually come to realize, however, that the formation of my identity as a gay student, and later as a gay teacher, involved much more than the simple utterance of “I’m gay.” Further, I would come to realize that the formation of my identity had an impact on my learning and my teaching. By the time I reached the sophomore year of my teacher-training program, I began to examine the personal and cultural formation of my own identity, and question the role of the educator to foster such self-awareness for his students.

**Cultural Context**

John Dewey (1897) notes that “the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself” (par. 2). The classroom is not a realm removed from the realities of the world. Our students bring valuable social knowledge into the classroom that shapes the way they learn. The classroom is not a vacuum free from the influences and trends of culture; it is a place where inherently social beings come to learn together.

I believe that successful teaching recognizes and utilizes the cultural context of the students’ lives. The ideas of John Dewey, Critical Pedagogy, and Queer Theory serve as the basis for my philosophy of teaching. Although these ideologies sometimes conflict, they all share a critical viewpoint of culture, and examine the influences culture has on the development of the identities of students and teachers. Freire (as cited in Wink, 2011) notes that many teachers hold the unfortunate belief that their students come into the classroom with zero knowledge. He emphasizes that this belief “is a terrible mistake. When kids come to school, they are already able to read the reality. Before reading words, kids already read the world” (p. 103). Students actively participate in a social world outside of the classroom, and the knowledge they gain in that world is valuable. It is the teacher’s responsibility, then, to gain “knowledge of social conditions, of the present state of civilization…in order properly to interpret the child's powers” (Dewey, 1897, par. 4). By becoming familiar with the culturally defined “powers” of the students, teachers can engage their students’ abilities in order to create learning experiences that matter to both student and teacher.

I believe that effective teaching develops a student’s ability to make critical observations of and decisions about culture. Freire (1974) suggests that a key characteristic of being fully human is “the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality” (p. 4). The recognition and utilization of the cultural context in which students live is vitally important, but truly transformative teaching goes further. It helps students become more fully human by awakening their own ability to recognize and criticize the influences of their cultural context. Education has the capacity to “enable men to discuss courageously the problems of their context—and to intervene in that context” (Freire, 1974, p. 30). Developing an ability to react critically to culture allows students to learn more about themselves and the world. This knowledge of self and culture then develops the students’ capacity to enact social change and create meaningful social progress.

An investigation of culture in the classroom develops the students’ ability to think critically on the macro-level, but it also creates opportunities to investigate the self. Jackson, Simpson, and Aycock (2005) summarize Dewey when they state, “the unending goal of education is growth” (p. 74). Critical analysis of culture serves this goal by enabling students to foster that growth themselves, both on an individual level and in a broader social context. A recognition and analysis of the culture of the students opens up investigations into “the ways in which the local and the global interact, the ways in which *being a self* and *having an identity* are understood through available social constructs” (Evans, 2002, p. 22). Cultural context and the formation of personal identity cannot be separated from one another, and both concepts are central to the development of our students.

**The Formation of Identity**

Teachers carry the responsibility of preparing students for the future. It is impossible, however, to predict what that future will look like. According to Dewey (1897), “To prepare [a student] for the future life means to give him command of himself” (par. 6). One of the most valuable skills teachers give to students is self-awareness. An awareness of one’s own identity, and the cultural forces which work to shape that identity, prepares students to flourish in an unknowable future.

An understanding of Queer Theory can help explain the value of fostering the development of identity in the classroom. Queer theorists support the idea that “lives are not lived as stereotypes or as categories” (Davis & Sumara, 1999, p. 197). Queer Theory seeks to dissolve the power of identity stereotypes by denaturalizing those identities that teachers passively believe are applicable to everybody (Evans, 2002; Davis & Sumara, 1999; Rodriguez, 2011). The tenets of Queer Theory suggest that identities are amorphous and ever-changing, rather than neat boxes easily described by culturally manufactured labels. Kate Evans (2002) suggests a notion of the “self as always becoming, as contingent, as continually navigated or in negotiation” (p. 20). The perception of identities as more than a list of signifiers influences the classroom profoundly. According to Davis and Sumara (1999), the belief that people defy categorical definition “becomes an important way to broaden perception, to complexify cognition, and to amplify the imagination of learners” (p. 202). A view of students as more than simple stereotypes values the complexities of the lives of students. A classroom environment that values students’ diverse identities fosters learning which is valuable and meaningful in the real world of the students.

Queer Theory also recognizes, however, a dialectic regarding the importance of social categories. Social categories are detrimental to the development of a sense of identity “in the sense that we are reduced by them (subjected to them)” (Evans, 2002, p. 22). The social life of humans, however, is “made intelligible through those categories (made into a subject)… So in subjection we risk losing our complexities, but without subjection we are not intelligible” (Evans, 2002, p.22). It is important for teachers to realize that identities, although amorphous and unique, are influenced by existing social categories. Identities can never be totally free from social categories, because those generalized categories originated in the minds of people. Rather than ignoring social categories and themes entirely, teachers might better foster the development of their students’ identities by critically examining social categories. Freire (1970) comments on the importance of acknowledging and investigating social categories and themes:

But—precisely because it is not possible to understand these themes apart from people—it is necessary that those concerned understand them as well. Thematic investigation thus becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self-awareness, which makes this investigation a starting point for the education process…of a liberating character. (107)

Social categories did not originate in a social vacuum; they are not “apart from the people.” Social categories are the result of the human attempt to make the complexity of life intelligible. The classroom does not need to be devoid of discussion of these broad, generalized themes. Rather, teachers should encourage “thematic investigation” in order to foster the self-awareness of their students.

The development of identity plays an important role in the classroom. An examination of identity, both as free from and dependent upon social themes and categories, develops the critical consciousness of students. Critically questioning the development of identity enables students to see themselves and the world in a different light. Davis and Sumara (1999) expand on the importance of constantly re-questioning and re-imagining our identities:

Learning to see differently, learning to see what not previously noticed, does not merely add a layer of information to what is already known. Rather, as an act of (re) cognition, the self that knows freshly understands itself differently and, as a consequence, understands the world differently. (201)

By asking students to examine the cultural influences on their identities, teachers can enable students to participate actively in meaningful learning experiences. Giving students the ability to question and re-think their identities prepares them to adapt with the ever-increasing rate of change that the future holds.

**Conclusion**

By the time I reached the beginning of my second year as a Music Education major, I had already begun to question the role my cultural context played in the formation of my identity. Just as I was beginning to consider these issues, I was asked to complete an assignment for Critical Pedagogy II entitled “Who Am I?” The assignment consisted in a ten-minute multi-media video project detailing the most important pieces of my life. My first thoughts about what to include in the video were obvious: my family, my development as a musician, my connection to teaching. I soon realized, however, that I would have to speak more deeply and sincerely about my identity as a gay man studying to become a teacher. I knew that I would have to include my coming out process and my experience as a gay student in the video. Although I only included the basic details of my coming out story and the cultural context in which it took place in the video itself, the assignment encouraged me to examine the experiences that make up my identity more thoroughly. I began to seriously consider the influences of culture on my identity. I was inspired to do research about the conflicts between the teacher identity and the gay identity. I re-imagined myself as I attempted to reconcile these traditionally disparate identities. I believe that teaching should encourage students to examine the influences of society on their identity, and the social implications of the ways in which they define their identities. I hope that all of my future students ask themselves “Who Am I?” at some point. I hope that they continue to examine their identities with increasing complexity, and find progressively more interesting answers to such a deceptively simple question.

**Sources**

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