
Opening Up Classroom Space: Student voice, Autobiography, & the Curriculum

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Incorporating autobiography into the classroom has the potential to facilitate reflective and interpretative practices, through which self-understanding and transformative learning may emerge. Bridging theory, practice, and the personal, this paper explores how autobiographical narratives were incorporated into a 9th grade social studies class to create a curricular space which values and embraces student voice, encourages a ethic of care and understanding between students, and embodies both the lived and living experiences. Through this experience students were able to explore their personal relationship to history, assimilate and accommodate new ideas and experiences, and engage in meaningful dialogue about values, beliefs, and perspectives.

I will never forget the way those twenty-six students in 3rd period World History gazed at me with their cold, empty stares. The uncomfortable silence filling our classroom shook my teaching confidence to its core. While I knew most of these students relatively well, at this moment, it was as if we were complete strangers. As I finished describing the autobiographical project which would receive much of our attention during the next few weeks, my students were visibly uncomfortable and seemed unsure of how to respond. I never imagined this assignment, which seemed so simple and straightforward, would become such an enlightening experience. Not only did it diverge from my typical pedagogical practices, but it also disturbed the routine patterns shaping our classroom environment.

This project explored issues of identity, history, and lived experience in ways which ruptured the finite and rigid boundaries that existed in our classroom. It not only provided opportunities to reflect upon who we were and how we understood and related to one another, but it also facilitated the growth of our class into an interactive community. This journey has led me to an understanding of how autobiographical narratives can provide a valuable context for self-reflection, shared experience, and mutual understanding. Additionally, because I am now

temporally separated from this experience, I have the needed distance to reflect on the following question: How can the use of autobiography create a curricular space which values and embraces student voice, encourages an ethic of care and understanding between students, and embodies both the lived and living experiences? This question serves as a personal and theoretical guide as I consider how my students and I encountered the complexities and intricacies of our curricular endeavor. This project, one deeply rooted in uncertainty, unfamiliarity, and personal risk, opens the mind to the idea of curriculum as a body of experiences with no owner to be shared by all those who seek to encounter its living being.

The Project

While it was clear that many of my students were unsure about what to make of this unorthodox assignment, I genuinely believed this project, which was geared towards an exploration of the self, would provide valuable opportunities for students to creatively express themselves and gain insight into the lives and experiences of their classmates. At first, though, I did not understand why students were uncomfortable with this idea. However, once I opened the floor for discussion and comments, some of their uncertainties were made clear: “Yo, Mr. B, I remember doing this type of stuff in middle school and I liked it, but this assignment is not really related to history.....is it?” Another student added, “Bernhardt, nobody ever asks me about myself in this school. We get to express ourselves in art, but that is the only place. I like this assignment. I’m down with it!”

Unlike the majority of my course assignments, this endeavor, which the students would affectionately refer to as the *Who am I?* project, did not have a well-defined structure, step-by-step “how to” instructions, or a rubric. While unsure how my students would handle this academic autonomy, I was also concerned that the lack of explicit directions would possibly yield mass confusion, a lack of interest, or disengagement. However, one of my primary intentions was to facilitate a learning experience that would unfold as we were wrapped up in the creative process. Additionally, I wanted student voices to guide this process, negotiate its path, and take

ownership over the direction it would take. Yet I had spent enough time in a classroom to know I needed to broadly frame the underlying goals of the assignment to get us started.

I explained the *Who am I?* project in three ways. First, students were to reflect on how past experiences, present life situations, and future intentions shape their relationship to the world. Because I was aware of my students’ personal interests and cultural backgrounds, I knew there would also be opportunities for them to make valuable connections to the historical subjects we were exploring in class. The basic idea, I explained, was “to embrace your understanding of the world, connect the personal with the historical, explore defining life experiences, and represent yourself to others.” Second, this exploration of the self would involve individual research, shared learning experiences, and personal reflection. However, the specifics would be negotiated as a class and discussed in more detail as we engaged with the assignment. Finally, at the end of this process there would be a presentation of learning. I did not provide students with a framework for these presentations. To do this, I thought, would stifle creativity, investment, and ultimately, individual voice. The students genuinely seemed enthusiastic about the project and excited to have an opportunity to, as Ahmed put it, “really bring my whole-self to school.” I had a few teachers ask me about the assignment because they overheard students discussing it, but, for the most part, no one else really seemed interested in the curricular adventure my students and I were about to undertake.

While there were times during early stages of this assignment when I questioned its value, lack of explicit guidance, and purpose, a conversation with one particular student restored my confidence. Marcus, who was an extremely quiet student I was slowly getting to know, came to see me after school a couple days after we began working on the project. “Mr. Bernhardt, I just wanted to thank you for this.” Unsure of what exactly he was talking about, I asked Marcus to be more specific. He just smiled and replied, “Thanks for letting me be who I am in your class. I have never had a teacher ask me to talk about myself in this

way.” As Marcus turned to leave I thanked him for his candor, and told him I looked forward to learning more about who he was. It was at that moment I realized this project had the potential to be a tremendously enriching experience.

The Emergence of Student Voice

It became clear this was an unusual assignment when I explained to the class that they were going to create autobiographical representations of personal experience and explain how their lives were interconnected with history. At this point Emma raised her hand to ask a question about the project: “Mr. Bernhardt, do our stories and personal histories really matter? It is not like other people really care.” She was not angry, resentful, or disrespectful. I thought her question was genuinely honest. As a way to address Emma’s concerns, I asked the class to share their insights about the possible value of “speak[ing] the self” (Castell, 1996, p. 407). While one student explained, “I think it’s important because you gotta let people know who you are and where you stand,” another student responded, “my personal history is what I am all about; nobody can take that away from me.” While Emma did not seem entirely satisfied with the replies from her peers, I suggested to the class we reflect on her questions while developing projects.

Emma’s question unsettled me and after spending some time after school reflecting on her comments, two thoughts came to mind. First, it was clear Emma’s voice had in some way been silenced or ignored. I immediately began to wonder if I unknowingly supported these types of practices in the classroom. Second, I began to wonder whether this assignment would shift the way I would interact, communicate, and relate to my students. Although there were no immediate answers to my anxieties, these questions led me to reflect on who I was as an educator and how my words, actions, and teaching practices shape and influence my students.

While I believed personal narratives would honor the diversity of voices in our classroom, I also thought they could provide an opening for students to re-connect and engage with the social studies curriculum. However, I was genuinely concerned how my colleagues would respond to this unfamiliar pedagogical

approach. The existence of prescribed curriculum, compulsory assessments, and mandated standards made the thought of using autobiographical narratives a risky endeavor. Because I was uncertain of the path we would be traveling and still unsure how autobiography, voice, and curriculum were interconnected, it would have been difficult to justify my deviation from the structured routine we were strongly encouraged to follow. Nonetheless, I truly believed this would be a meaningful learning experience for my students.

Although I conceived the initial framework for this assignment, the project’s conceptual development, the aesthetic form it would take, and even the definition of terms such as past, present, future, history, and experience were negotiated as a class. This open dialogue became a way for me to “let go” to allow the unpredictable to unfold. This loosening of teacher control created a space for student voice to be represented and signifies a shift from the dominating language of “i” to the inclusive and abundant “WE.” As I think back to this experience with my students, Madeline Grumet’s (1990) conceptualization of the contextual and narrative voices offers a theoretical foundation to consider both the significance and complexity of this autobiographical project. This assignment was developed to create a curricular space to explore individual relationships to history, assimilate and accommodate new ideas and different experiences, and create an environment emphasizing trust, collegiality, and an awareness of others’ perspectives and beliefs. Grumet’s theoretical perspective, which I first encountered in my academic work at George Washington University, serves as a reflective framework to better understand this experience.

The Contextual Voice

The contextual voice embodies the idea “the human being is a person who signifies – gives and derives meaning to and from the ‘things’ of the world” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 14) This voice opens our eyes to the numerous complexities underlying the social, political, and cultural worlds in which we live. The contextual voice looks to examine “the kinds of relationships that exist between the interrelated parts and

functions that we call the person and the inter-related structure of knowledge and society that we call the external world” (Grumet, 1976, p. 114). When introducing the assignment, I challenged students to think about the ways their experiences shape their values, beliefs, and relationships to others. Providing time and space to consider these influences allowed students to develop a deeper understanding of how they are situated in the world. I distinctly remember Leslie’s response when she realized many of her classmates were experiencing the same types of challenges she was facing. With a look of wonderment, she said to me, “Mr. B. we have been in classes together since elementary school and I never really knew anything about any of my classmates’ personal lives.”

The students suggested conducting interviews might be an effective way to begin engaging with autobiographical thinking. The students also decided it would be more interesting if the interviews took place in groups and were guided by narratives and conversation rather than a list of pre-determined questions or teacher prompts. As discussions about the interview protocol developed, it was decided while each individual presented, other group members would take notes and write down any questions. After the interviews, there would be time for conversation and group reflection.

As a way to help everyone begin preparing for the interview process, the students first met in small groups to brainstorm what they would share. These groups served as a departure point for encountering and investigating the complex relationship between the self and the external world. As I visited with each group, I found students involved in meaningful conversations about a variety of social, cultural, and personal issues. Around the time we were working on this project, many of my students were involved in a school walkout to participate in an immigration protest. One particular student, Angela, whose parents had supported her decision to walk out of school, passionately talked about the importance of her cultural identity and that people from outside of her community sometimes struggle to understand her values. “I just believe in what I did. I had to do it. I can’t help it if people don’t understand it was impor-

tant to walk out and protest. I should not have to explain myself; this is who I am.”

Other stories that emerged from these early conversations addressed issues related to discrimination, social pressures, religion, the importance of role models, and family separation. Although discussion was just beginning, students were already engaged in each other’s experiences and perspectives. Students were not simply sharing stories; they were opening themselves up for multiple readings and interpretations. This, in Grumet’s (1990) words, “emphasizes the importance of listening to the ‘chorus’ in our voices, and understanding that identity and context are choral and not solo performances” (p. 26).

The Narrative Voice

I now understand how important it is to consider the meanings of the words we use when sharing personal histories and experiences. These words represent our narrative voice and influence how we construct meaning, share meaning, and represent meaning. While it can be difficult to wholly understand the experience of others, an encounter with the autobiographical can illuminate the various ways we negotiate, celebrate, traverse, and struggle with life. Approaching voice “as the medium for the projection of meaning” (Grumet, 1990, p. 279) can help students deeply connect with their interests, realities, and passions.

The majority of my students were from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and never really seemed to connect to the organization and presentation of the social studies curriculum. This assignment encouraged students to attach their own meanings to history and explore the complexities and nuances within these meanings. While one student shared his perspective of living within the confines of the caste system in India, another student, speaking about her familial responsibilities, illuminated how gender roles are an important part of her household. These stories were characteristic of the anecdotes I heard while listening to the conversations taking place in interview groups. Writing about the value of anecdotal narrative in phenomenological research, Van Manen (1990) suggests, “[the] anecdote is one of the implements for laying bare the covered-over

meanings” (p. 119). These narratives have the potential to not only reveal what is hidden, protected, or unspoken, but they also offer intimate access into the life world of the storyteller. Using anecdotes as a method to represent words, emotions, and life moments provided a textured framework for students to articulate, discuss, and interpret their experiences.

The interactions among group members suggested listening was as highly valued as speaking. Students were not only paying attention to the voices they heard, but also thinking deeply about the various meanings underlying these voices. This led students to ask insightful questions about the complexities of interpreting history, the importance of shared understanding, and the relevance of using history to connect to personal experience. Having students explore the meaning of each other’s stories, words, and ideas opened the door to a world of inquiry and dialogue I never imagined possible.

Risks of Autobiographical Inquiry

As students diligently worked to develop their autobiographical presentations, I noticed a shift in the way they were interacting with each other. Because I did not require any particular structure for presentations, the students were forced to collaborate with each other to develop ideas. While some students were invested in visual or performance art, others were more interested in storytelling and poetry. The power dynamics in the class were shifting and I was no longer considered the expert; my students moved into this role.

The barriers which often separate the academic and personal seemed to be slowly breaking down. I vividly remember numerous students bringing in piles of family pictures, letters, and cultural artifacts to integrate into their presentations. These various forms of representation provided a meaningful way for students to connect to each other. One particular student, Jose, brought in his guitar and shared songs passed down for generations in his family. Most of us did not know Jose was interested in music much less an avid guitar player with passionate connections to his rich Aztec cultural roots.

While I recognized there was something special happening in our classroom, I was unaware of

the possible drawbacks of an autobiographical reading of the self. The only risks I was initially concerned about were those I was taking as a teacher. First, I was concerned other teachers were going to question my teaching. Would I be the one they sneered about in the workroom because I choose not to follow mandated curricular activities and content? How would I explain to my department chair my curricular divergence from the other teachers on my academic team? Second, I was overly anxious about whether my students would “buy into” this assignment and fully participate in the ways I envisioned. How would the students react as we moved through this creative process? If this project did not result in a positive experience would I be able to get them actively involved in other creative activities? Finally, there were moments when I was unable to completely let go of my teaching desire to make sure all students were fully participating. As a result, I did not leave space for students who may have needed more time to become comfortable with autobiographical inquiry; nor did I provide options for those who were not prepared to explore or reveal the personal.

When Rosa began her presentation, though, I immediately realized my concerns should have been focused on my students rather than myself. She immediately began to talk about her family’s recent trouble with immigrations services, her father’s deportation, and her brother’s recent incarceration. I instantly realized the risks of this project. When I saw tears rolling down her face, I realized I was not really sure how to handle the situation. Although uncertain how to react, I clearly understood this was a situation I encouraged and directly facilitated. While the other students were unbelievably supportive and immediately comforted Rosa with hugs and kind words, I could not help but wonder why I did not consider the implications of self-disclosure.

How was I to deal with the traumas called forth by such an assignment? Was I even prepared to deal with this? How did I not consider the underlying implications of this experience? What was I thinking? Was my furor to fuse the curriculum with the personal somehow a misguided desire? Is it better to “leave the ‘self’ and

its ‘meanings’ and its ‘expressions’ out of the classroom” (Suzanne De Castell, 1996, p. 406)?

As I solemnly sat at my desk after school thinking about the day’s events, I feverishly searched to find answers to my questions and concerns about autobiography, self-disclosure, and my own desires as a teacher. While deeply concerned about Rosa, I also wondered which voices I unintentionally marginalized in my effort to encourage students to open themselves up for interpretation. Writing about “coming to voice” through “dialogue,” Suzanne De Castell (1996) warns, “liberatory pedagogy is...all too often more and not less, repressive” (p. 405). Is it possible the voices I intended to call upon to speak were actually silenced? Pointing out the risks of self expression in the classroom, Castell suggests these types of discursive practices can actually function to “silence, control, and render oneself as invisible as possible” (p. 405).

In my desire to use autobiographical inquiry to help students make deeper connections to both the curriculum and their classmates, I tacitly encouraged the sharing of traumatic stories and may have unknowingly silenced those who most wished to speak. While I knew student subjectivity would emerge, I never considered requiring students to “speak the self,” to find and make public one’s “authentic voice,” may have forced some students to create an artificial self which was, in a sense, made and made-up (Castell, 1996, p. 407). Although autobiography opens the door to the possibility of exploring the self, there is an element of risk requiring an awareness of the possible consequences arising from the unleashing of trauma, self-disclosure, and the silencing of voice.

The Return Arc of Reflection

Rather than fusing all of these thoughts together to create a sense of closure, I think it is best to end by addressing three ideas with the intention of not only creating further conversation, but to highlight the transformative power of this experience. My goal is not to suggest a list of objective truths, to specify prescriptive teaching approaches, or to stipulate a set of reductionist strategies to incorporate into the classroom. Instead, I hope to encourage teachers to not only reflect on the communication patterns within their classroom, but to also develop an

awareness of how teaching practices influence student investment, student participation, and the presence of student voice.

First, watching students think creatively and critically about the world around them, articulate personal narratives to classmates in meaningful ways, and express passion, empathy, and kindness towards other human beings made me realize the importance of centralizing students’ voices and experiences in the classroom. Bill Ayers (1990), shedding light on the value of honoring the life stories of students, suggests our work with children is to “convey their lives as they present them, to portray the world with immediacy as they see it, to create a monograph on meaning in which youngsters are conscious collaborators” (Ayers, 1990, p. 272). Hence, subjectivity, experience, voice, and self-reflection, all core elements of autobiography, cannot be ignored, dismissed, or devalued. I was not only asking my students to explore their voice, but I was creating a space for them to use their voice to connect to the history curriculum, explore how they encounter, understand, and make sense of the world, and represent themselves to others. The classroom became a space where students could develop meaningful relationships with classmates, personal creativity was valued and embraced, and learning was not measured by pre-selected criteria isolated from student experience or personal interests.

Second, the opening of curricular space for student voice created a classroom setting which embodied feelings of collegiality, care, and personal investment. I never realized how disconnected students were from their classmates. While many of my students grew up in the same neighborhood, rode the same bus to school, and passed in the hallway every day, they knew little about each other’s lived or living experiences. Additionally, it was clear they were never really provided opportunities in class to authentically encounter and learn about each other’s perspectives. This project provided space and time for all to these things to happen. I witnessed how, over the course of a few weeks, a group of strangers can develop into a well connected community of learners who were sincerely concerned for the success and well-being of one another.

Finally, asking students to explore the underlying complexity of the histories reverberating within their voice provides a valuable opportunity for students to uncover how the past influences present experiences. In *Aesthetic Modes of Knowing*, Elliott Eisner (1985) writes, "All experience is the product of both the features of the world and the biography of the individual; our experience is influenced by our past as it interacts with our present" (p. 25-26). Situating voice as a site for exploring history provides a method for students to discover relationships between their lived and living experiences. To authentically expose the living journey, it is helpful to "return to the past to capture it as it hovers over the present" (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 520). Listening to students reflect on how the past serves as a living presence in their own voices provided me with a better understanding about how history can teach us about our own existence, provide insight into how we make meaning of the world around us, and guide our decisions about the future.

Autobiographical narratives create new possibilities for engaging students in the learning process and serve as a rich context for self-inquiry, historical connection, and the development of personal relationships. In addition, it provides valuable opportunities for self-reflection about my role as a teacher, my pedagogical intentions, and how my teaching practices shape and influence the learning process. Creating a curricular space which values and embraces student voice, encourages an ethic of care and understanding between students, and embodies both the lived and living experiences seems like, from the standpoint of a teacher, a valuable endeavor. However, after all my personal reflection, descriptive analysis, and subjective interpretation, I still have some uncertainties and think it may be best, in the end, to just ask students why it is important to clearly hear their voices.

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