

Becoming and Philosophizing

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As a pre-service teacher, there is no denying that my philosophy of education is in its infancy. That I have just started along this process of becoming helps to qualify the current state of my philosophy. That being said, it is important to acknowledge that said philosophy draws upon aspects of my identity that existed before I began pursuing a career in education. These aspects have blended with theories and ideas to which I have recently been exposed and that have mirrored the ideas and goals I personally value to form my philosophy of education. While this formation is relatively nascent, a review of its main elements is important. Such an exercise will allow me to further flesh out the elements of my philosophy of education, to consider its application, and to reflect upon the process through which it came about and in which it currently exists. What follows is such an exercise.

Part I – Synthesizing Aspect of Identity

My identity is perpetually in the process of “becoming” (Hall, 1999, p. 16). It is constantly changing, building upon and augmenting that which existed before. My identity as a teacher cannot be separated from my personal identity, as it is the latter upon which my identity as a teacher is in the process of being built. My pursuit of a career in education has undoubtedly resulted in parts of my identity changing or evolving. No less, certain elements and themes persist. Two examples of this are my pursuit of cross-cultural exchange and my promotion of social justice. That these two themes are part of my identity is evidenced in my Cultural Autobiography. That they are in the process of becoming part of my identity as an educator is evidenced in my papers on Culture, Community, and Critical Pedagogy.

Growing up in the homogenous environment that I did, an element of my identity from a young age has been seeking out and appreciating cultures that were different than my own

(Duffy, 2013, p.4). This element is one that has persisted as I create my identity as an educator. Cross-cultural exchange has enormous educative possibilities (Merryfield, 2002, p.5). However, for such an exchange to occur it must move beyond the fetish by interacting and experiencing further the culture and acknowledging the hybridization of the exchanging cultures. Doing so works to “demystify” that which has been fetishized (Marx, 1906, p.83). Such demystification can occur beyond fetishized commodities. In the classroom, cross-cultural learning can aid students to move beyond the exotic and gain “cultural understanding (Merryfield, 2002, p.2). Cross-cultural exchange can also significantly impact a community. Expression of one’s cultural identity and the sharing of that with others (through economic or non-economic avenues) have the potential to create positive change. This can be seen through “immigrantification” in places like Columbus’ Northland Mall area and can be mirrored into the classroom. By acknowledging the presence of different ethnicities and cultures, there is the potential to transform a classroom that is “the focus of a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations” (Massey, 1994, p.8) and thus can work against the oversimplification of global issues. A critical pedagogy that embraces cross-cultural exchange has the potential to redefine concepts of identity. This includes both National Identity, but also school identity and individuality. As Binya Subedi writes, “when theorizing differences, it is useful to consider how identities function within intersections in the sense that identities... are interconnected” (2010, p.10). Through cross-cultural interactions we can work to identify these intersections and in doing so reimagining the differing scales of identity.

Another important part of my cultural identity is my history of activism on issues of social justice. While my work towards social justice in recent years has “engender themselves in softer ways” (Duffy, 2013, p. 6), it is evident that it will play an important part of my identity as an educator by the connections I have made between it and culture, community, and critical

pedagogy. In writing about culture and ethnic food, the possibility of going beyond the fetish to have a cross-cultural experience was discussed. Not only is this important for the understanding of other cultures, but it is also an important matter of social justice. In fetishizing food, you are “eating the other”. The process of othering can be seen as a violent action – an act of injustice. In classrooms, the differences that come out of othering are magnified by “hegemonic classroom practices that reproduce and reinforce the cultural and educational traditions of white, middle-class communities at the expense of non-dominant cultures’ educational traditions” (Dover, 2009, p.507). Thus, using the classroom to address “othering” and inequities that can come with it can work towards social justice. Similarly, the study of immigrant and ethnic minority populations and their impact on a place speaks to issues of social justice. Immigrant and ethnic minority populations have a role to play in how the economy “functions through space, geography, and social institutions” (Gruenewald, 2003, p.629). Denial of or exclusion from this role would be an injustice. It follows that immigrant and ethnic minority populations also have a role to play in the classroom. Inclusion is also an important social justice aspect of critical pedagogy. By employing a critical global perspective in a classroom, an educator can work to create an inclusive environment. A critical global perspective has the potential to expand the American national identity, bringing into it values and people who have had the injustice of being marginalized – including students.

Part II – Constructing a Philosophy

In constructing a personal philosophy of education, I have considered many of the theories and ideas surrounding education and identified those that match my values and what I aim to accomplish as a teacher. There should be no surprise that many of the theories that help to frame my philosophy are related and connected. Identifying these theories and reviewing their

educative purposes will help to establishing the current state of my personal philosophy of education.

Acknowledging that students are not empty vessels, but rather are intelligent beings that bring with them to the classroom multiple experiences, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds is incredibly important. Consequently, culturally responsive teaching is a vital element to my philosophy of education. It is incredibly important to aid students “to accept and affirm their cultural identity” (Ladson-Bilings, 1995, p. 469). To do this, one must reflect on and acknowledge their own background and the biases they possess (Ladson-Bilings, 1995) so as to avoid any negative correlation between a student’s race, class, or ethnicity and the teacher’s attitudes towards them (Gay, 2002, 615). Similarly, a culturally responsive teacher holds high expectations for the students and encourages them “to be themselves in dress, language style, and interaction styles” (Ladson Billings p. 476). Such an approach welcomes different cultures in the classroom and thus encourages cross-cultural interaction, something that is of great importance to me as demonstrated in Part 1 of this paper. Students learn better when content is familiar and builds upon the prior knowledge (Gay, 2002). This fact, coupled with the reality of diverse school populations provides the opportunity for cross-cultural learning through a teacher being culturally responsive to his or her students (Merryfield, 2002, p.5). Culturally responsive teaching moves beyond simply teaching to the test. It involves a teacher developing a relationship with his or her students to ensure that educational success does not come at “the expense of their cultural and psychosocial well-being” (Ladson-Billings 475). It moves beyond equating “differences with deficiencies” (Gay, 2002, p. 614). As Geneva Gay argues, “To attempt to ignore diversity in the classroom, or pretend that it is not an important variable in teaching and learning, merely submerges rather than purges differences and demeans the

humanity of ethnically and culturally diverse students” (2002, p.618). A culturally responsive teacher demonstrates care for his or her students, acting as a warm demander that demonstrates “personal caring and concern for students while simultaneously demanding and facilitating high academic performance” (Gay, 2002, 620).

Not only is it important that a teacher consider the cultural identities that their students bring with them into the classroom, but they must also consider their previous experiences. By doing this and continuing to build upon the continuity of these experiences a teacher is implementing experiential education. This concept is one that I consider to be an important dimension to my philosophy of education and one that feeds into other dimensions I consider to be important. To provide students with educative experiences, a teacher has “the responsibility for understanding the needs and capacities” of their students (Dewey, 1938, 45). Thus, it is evident that culturally responsive teaching feeds into experiential education. Experiential education is a social process through which the relationship between the teacher and student changes from that of an “external boss” to that of a “leader of group activities” (Dewey, p. 59). Such a change puts students on more of a level playing field as their learning is fused with experience. Paulo Freire touches upon this, stating that in traditional education “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” and that such a process “negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry” (Freire, 1970, p. 58). Experiential learning for Freire takes the form of problem-posing education, which denies the idea that man is separate from the world.

While there are many applications of experiential learning, one application that I plan to apply within my classrooms is service learning. Service learning is a form of experiential learning where community service is tied to academic work. Such learning has great potential.

Through service learning, students are mobilized, develop leadership and problem solving skills, employ non-school based literacies, learn the value of service, and potentially can expand their sense of community (King, 2004). Clearly, there is great potential for educative experiences for a social studies classroom. Similarly, the idea of community is paramount to service learning. For service learning to be successful, however, it must be done through a critical lens. Service learning brings up the concern over “the problem of critical intervention” (Freire, 1970, p.38). Similarly, the service cannot serve as an instrument of dehumanization (Freire, 1970) or othering by a more privileged group (King, 2004). Those in need of service must play a role in the service that is designed to aid them. Problems with service learning can also be avoided through critical self-reflection on the part of the students. They should be required to reflect on their privileged status, on how they also get something out of the service (it is not a one-way act), and on the broader ideas of power and societal structure that may have resulted in the issue that required service (King, 2004, p. 4).

Service learning speaks to yet another important element that I hope to incorporate into my classroom as a future social studies teacher: social justice education. Social justice education can be defined as a “blend of content and process intended to enhance equity across multiple identity groups..., foster critical perspectives, and promote social actions” (Dover, 2009, 508). As may be evident, the values and goals that I have as an aspiring social studies teacher continue to build upon one another. Social justice education incorporates much of what has already been reviewed. Hegemonic classroom practices that reinforce “educational traditions of white, middle class communities” (Dover, p. 507) often result in inequity. This speaks to the need for culturally responsive teaching in a classroom that incorporates social justice education. Culturally responsive teaching also calls for teachers to “help students to recognize, understand, and

critique current social inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 476). With such critique, parallels are drawn yet again to social justice education’s call for the fostering of critical perspectives. The promotion of social action feeds directly into service learning. Through service learning projects, students will have the opportunity to further understand and work alongside those that they are serving so as to combat inequity and social injustice. To educate for social justice, the elements of culturally responsive teaching, critical perspectives, and service learning must all synthesize and focus on addressing matters of social injustice.

It is also important to me that the reach of social justice education is taken into consideration in the classroom. Social justice education must consider the reality that “the geography of social relations is changing” (Massey, 1994, p.7). By having a “global sense of the local, a global sense of place” (Massey, 1994, p. 9) a classroom can move beyond the imagined community of the nation (Anderson, 1983) and embody global education and global citizenship. Such an approach will foster the flexibility of affinity in citizens-in-formation that upsets the binary of nationalism vs. cosmopolitanism. Efforts to promote a global perspective in the classroom will involve a blending of Roland Case’s substantive (universal and cultural values and practices, global interconnections, present worldwide concerns and conditions, origins and past patterns of world affairs, and alternative future directions in worldwide affairs) and his perceptual (open-mindedness, anticipation of complexity, resistance to stereotyping, inclination to empathize, nonchauvinism) dimensions of global perspectives (Case, 1993). Teaching and encouraging these dimensions collectively will foster a global perspective in students and “create communities that work toward local and global social justice responsibilities” (Subedi, 2010, p.15).

The blending of these theories and ideas of social studies education will result in the creation of globally minded, justice focused, action oriented students. However, such a philosophy of education cannot be removed from the modern educational environment. Modern students are facing the influx of neoliberal pedagogy, one that places great emphasis on standardized tests and efficiency (Giroux, 2011) at the cost of many of the aforementioned elements of my personal philosophy of education. While this is something that I can work against as a teacher, it is a reality that cannot be ignored as I work with my students. Efforts in the classroom to employ the dimensions of my philosophy of education must be coupled with efforts that ensure students learn the content on which they will be tested. Efforts must also ensure that students' literacies are further developed. Such a goal allows for other elements of my philosophy of education to be incorporated. By fostering critical literacy in students, they will examine issues of "race, culture, class, gender, media, and the environment in the hope of creating a more just, humane, democratic, and equal world" (Wolk, 2003, p. 102). Another literacy that I believe is important to foster in the classroom is that of technology. Thus, in my efforts to enact my philosophy of education I will utilize technology so as to foster an appropriate understanding and critical utilization of the digital tools and sources that characterize the modern world. Such utilization will also allow for discussion of privilege and for instances of "time-space-compression" to break through imagined borders (Massey, 1994, p. 1). Thus, the incorporation of technology will fit seamlessly into the implementation of my philosophy of education.

Part III – Enacting a Philosophy

Developing a philosophy of education is important. However, development without application is fruitless. Consequently, it is important to consider how I will employ my

philosophy of education in the classroom. As has been discussed, my philosophy of education involves a number of elements and theories that are related and build upon one another. This reality lends itself to the employment of multiple aspects of my philosophy of education through the same lessons.

A vital element of employing culturally responsive pedagogy in a classroom is getting to know your student. Consequently, I will build into my classrooms opportunities to do just that. This may include biographical assignments, much like that aforementioned Cultural Autobiographical paper. This application can also be as simple as building in time into classroom management to allow for interactions with students that go beyond the superficial. Such interactions are not only important for culturally responsive pedagogy, but also serve as an example of the highly valued cross-cultural exchange. Such an exchange will also provide information about student's backgrounds and the injustice and inequity that they have faced, which also allows for better incorporation of social justice education into my methodology. To accomplish this, I will be proactive in modeling this behavior of opening up and sharing my own background. Similarly, it will be clear both through my behavior and in written expectations that my classroom is a safe environment for students to be themselves. By getting to know my students and their cultural background, I will then be able to be responsive to them. It will inform my choices of lessons, activities, and materials to employ options that will speak to students and their personal backgrounds. It will also provide me with the insight for the voices and perspectives that may be missing from our classroom, so as to ensure that they too are properly incorporated. Getting to know my students will allow me to differentiate between students, when necessary. It also allows for me to incorporate student choice into my lessons plans, which in addition to allowing students to pursue topics rooted in the own cultural tradition if they desire

will also provide autonomy and motivation to complete the assignments. Throughout all of this, I will work to be a culturally responsive teacher by having high expectations of my students, while constantly encouraging them.

Numerous elements of my philosophy of education had the roots in the idea of experiential learning. Applying this in my classroom will allow me to weave in multiple elements of what I want to accomplish as an educator. The first step to implementing experiential learning is to affirm that I will not rely on the “stand and lecture” model of teaching that Dewey and Freire lobbied against. That is not to say that I will never use lectures to communicate content to my students. Lecture will be just one of many tools in my educational toolbox. To incorporate experience into my classrooms, I will work to design lessons that incorporate elements of the content into the methodology. For example, if I were to be teaching on the role of socioeconomic status on one’s place in a democracy, I could structure a student-centered lesson where certain student’s have access to more or better resources than others. In doing so, I am ensuring that students not only learn about concepts such as privilege and marginality, but they are also experiencing it. Such an exercise would need to be followed by critical reflection so as to ensure that all students are given the opportunity to consider the multiple perspectives that were at play in the lesson. Role-playing is another avenue through which experiential learning can provide for educative experiences. Rather than lecturing to students about how a bill becomes a law, I can provide them with the information they need, assign them roles, and set them to work creating a bill and taking it through the legislative steps. Such an activity gets students invested in the material, allow them to develop perspective consciousness, and understand the nature of power and position in the legislative process.

By implementing service learning, I can make the connection between experiential learning and social justice. This will begin by helping my students understand, identify, and critic inequities. From there, the selection of one issue to be addressed is necessary. This has the potential for global education to play a role, as I can encourage to students to look at instances of social injustice beyond the imagined borders of their classroom, community, state, and nation. Similarly, I will instruct students to approach such issues with an open mind and an appreciation of its complexity. I will model and expect them to move beyond stereotypes and the risk of othering those that they are working with to serve. I will also model and expect the development of an empathetic nature in our service learning, so as to ensure a properly oriented global perspective to our work. Service learning provides the opportunity for individual or group/class projects. Inherent to any service-learning project that will be implemented in my classroom is the buy-in and participation of those receiving the services. Such an interaction provides the opportunity for ongoing cross-cultural interaction between the students and those receiving service, which is an important element to global education (Merryfield, 2002).

Elements of experiential learning, social justice education, and global education can also be implemented in my classroom through the use of guest speakers. By using individuals from the local and global community to speak on issues of social justice, I will ensure that my students are exposed to multiple perspectives and have ongoing instances of learning from those of another culture. Here too will I be able to incorporate technology based education into my classroom. Through the time-space compression power of the Internet, students in my classroom will be able to engage and learn from people around the world. Be it a guest speaker from Bangladesh who joins class via Skype or an ongoing service learning projects with students in Satte, Japan, technology provides significant learning opportunities that go beyond imagined

communities. My efforts to prepare my students for the standardized tests that they are to face will also provide opportunities to employ my philosophy of education. While certain content must be taught, the teaching of it can be run through my personal philosophy lens so as to ensure that multiple perspectives, marginalized voices, and global elements are incorporated. Thus, a lesson on the industrial revolution would not be complete without covering the perspective of the poor working class and those marginalized within that class. Nor would it be complete without review of the impact of the industrial revolution in countries outside of the areas usually focused on in such lessons. In working to build up my student reading literacy, the use of primary and secondary sources in the classroom will be paramount. Here too will I be able to introduce marginalized voice, texts from “the other” (Merryfield, 2002, p. 3).

My philosophy of education is expansive and complicated. It follows that the potential for its application is diverse. What has been covered here is but a sampling of the methodology and content routes through which I will work to implement my philosophy of education. As my philosophy of education is in the process of becoming (Hall, 1999) so to is its implementation. With continual experience in the classroom, the methods and avenues through which I apply my philosophy will assuredly evolve.

Part IV – Reflecting on Becoming

As I reflect on all the I have learned, all that I have been exposed to during the past semester I am inundated with a flood of thoughts, questions, concerns as to where I currently find myself in my process of becoming. Reflecting on my experience and my process of developing perspective consciousness is no more important than at a time like the present when I am about to take a major step to becoming an educator by starting to student teach. What follows is a sampling of my thoughts and reflections during the semester and as I find myself currently.

One theme that I have stopped to reflect on frequently over the past two months is how I failed to properly appreciate the role of difficulties faced by teachers. I certainly came into the program with a significant amount of respect for teachers, as I as was aspiring to be one. However, the respect that I now hold for teachers has grown significantly over the past weeks. My original focus on teacher was limited to content. I am someone who appreciates and sees value in the social sciences and thus I wanted to work to spread this information and appreciation to students. This past semester has taught me that teaching goes far beyond content. Reflecting on my personal background, I question whether my privilege status resulted in me not fully understanding the role of teachers. I know am beginning to understand the overwhelming amount of considerations that a teacher accounts for, the overwhelming amount of decisions that are made and remade. Teaching goes beyond the required content, beyond test prep. It involves getting to know and responding to your students. Challenging them with different learning methods. Exposing them to difficult, yet immensely important ideas like marginality, social justice, and global citizenship. When I think of my ignorance on many of these accounts, I consider my Cultural Autobiography. That I had a financially secure, loving, and stable family like, that I had a cultural background that parallel that of my school district, and that I was successful academically meant that in large part I sailed through school without ever needing guidance from, encouragement from, challenge from teachers. The surprise that I experienced as I learned all that went into being a successful social studies teacher helps to frame how I previously viewed teaching and how that has sense changed.

My increased appreciation and understanding of teaching has fed into much of what makes up my philosophy of education. Establishing what I value and want to accomplish as a teacher was not an easy task. Indeed, it is still ongoing. No less, I am confident that while

establishing a philosophy of education was difficult, effectively implementing it will be all the more difficult. I can brainstorm and conjecture as to how I plan to apply my values as an educator, as I did in Part III of this paper. However, such an exercise exists in vacuum that is free of the many difficulties, distractions, and pressures that I will face once in a classroom. These can range from the small task of learning students' names and taking attendance to the difficult and heartbreaking reality of school violence.

Beyond the concern of simply attempting to apply my values is the concern that the implementation of my personal philosophy will fall victim to the many pitfalls that lay in its path. In creating service learning projects, will I be able to ensure that service does not result in the "othering" of those being served? I question my ability to always avoid the single story or to avoid exoticizing other cultures to motivate students into learning (Merryfield, 2002, p.2). Similarly, there is the potential to fetishize the cultural background of my own students as I work to be a culturally responsive teacher. I continue to examine my biases or lack thereof. As a person who is of reasonable intelligence and who has succeeded academically, will I be able to maintain patience as I work with students who struggle with the material? Furthermore, I acknowledge that my experiences in the classroom may have the potential to elicit biases that I was unaware that I held. Will personal biases based on race, gender, culture, privilege come out once they are truly tested in a classroom setting? My concerns for the pitfalls of elements of my philosophy of education and for personal biases that may come to surface are important. While I am unsure of the likelihood of such issues coming to fruition, I can acknowledge that my anticipated concern will at least assist me in identifying them if they do.

Another concern I have is related to those I have already detailed, but incorporates my status for the next nine months. I will be a student teacher - neither solely teacher, nor solely

student. While many of the theorist that we read over the past semester highlighted the importance of a “teacher-as-student” and “student-as-teacher” relationship, I am speaking more to my personal concern of balancing the act of teaching (as a student teacher) and being a student. Rightfully so, the act of working to teach effectively and implement my philosophy of education while balancing my Masters coursework will be difficult. My understanding of this does not help to diminish the fact that this concern is at the forefront of my mind during any reflection in which I engage.

From the outset of the semester, the material that we have covered has caused me to view the world different. As issues of culture, community, and critical pedagogy were introduced, elements of this were incorporated into the lens through which I viewed the world. An example of the coursework causing me to pause and reflect occurred on a recent visit back to my hometown. Upon visiting what could best be described as the downtown area of Tallmadge, OH, I noticed that a family owned restaurant that had been in business for the last decade¹ had closed. Across its old sign was a banner that announced that a new Mexican restaurant was opening in its place. Seeing this, I stopped to reflect. This new restaurant will be the third Mexican restaurant to have opened in Tallmadge, a predominately white suburb of Akron with a population just over 17,000, since 2005. Knowing that this was the third such restaurant, I questioned whether there had been a significant demographic shift since I had called Tallmadge home. My curiosity led to the check with the Census data, from which I learned that within Tallmadge there are only 178 individuals who are of Hispanic or Latino origin. This confirmed that these restaurants were not the result of a major shift in demographics and consequently these

¹ Tallmadge was a semi-dry (no restaurant alcohol sales) city until 2001. As a result, there were relatively few restaurants in the city. The restaurant I describe was the first to open after the city approved alcohol sales in restaurants. So, while being in business for over a decade may not set any records, it is a notable establishment and achievement for the city.

businesses and their employees must live in communities and towns other than Tallmadge. My thoughts then turned to my Culture paper and the idea of fetishizing through ethnic food. Having grown up in the culture, I concluded that the likely occurrence in these restaurants was that dinners did not move beyond the fetish to engage in a cross-cultural education. Such a reality does not change the fact that these Mexican restaurants will establish themselves in formerly vacant properties, thus introducing the focus of my second paper on community and the possibility of revitalization through ethnic businesses. While I witnessed this and first had this thought process before my third paper the focused on critical global perspectives, there are clear ways in which connections can be made. This anecdote demonstrates how the coursework of the summer has affected how I look at things and caused me to stop and reflect.

As I have continued to reflect on the status of my perspective consciousness, I have noticed the recurring theme of critique. Through our readings over the semester, it has been made evident that critique is an important element to being a good teacher. That behind said, I at times have concerns that I view the world too critically. Often this criticism take the form of a reaction to capitalism - be it focusing on the negative impact of a high end apartment complex being built across from Ohio State's campus or questioning the veracity of the reporting found within the WOSU's Columbus Neighborhoods documentaries. While I believe, much like the many theorists that were assigned this semester, that a critical perspective is important, I have personal concerns that it fosters a sense of negativity. Negativity is something that I do not value for myself and is most certainly not something that I want to instill in my future students. My awareness and reflection on this matter is ongoing. I need to consider how critique can be viewed and accomplished positively. Similarly, I need to ensure that I balance any sort of negativity with a focus on the positive, so as to avoid telling a single, negative, story.

Conclusion

As I conclude this detailing of my philosophy of education, I am on the cusp of entering the next stage in my pursuit of a Masters of Education and a career in education. There is no doubt that if I had written such a document two months ago, it would have been significantly different. I am confident that as I progress further along the road toward becoming a teacher my philosophy of education will continue to evolve. Come May and the completion of the Masters program, my philosophy of education will assuredly have evolved from its current form. To borrow a phrase from Dr. Merry Merryfield, I can only imagine what a difference a Masters of Education can make. Such a difference is one I am eager to continue to experience during my perpetual process of becoming.

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