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Revising Our Community: Revising Ourselves

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To love another human being requires a concrete engagement with that other person as an embodied subject with a particular point of view, concerns, and biography....Thus, in 'transcending' we do not move beyond the world but more deeply into it, and in being affected by 'the other' we reconnect with ourselves as subjects who have some measure of freedom. In these moments, we do not turn away from the precariousness of existence but embrace all of who we are as we more fully partake of life.

—Martin Halling

A few years ago I began to re-see my classroom as a community, not only a place where students will have opportunities to develop as readers and writers, but also one where students will develop an understanding of the responsibilities of participating and contributing to the larger community which includes the landscape, as well as the human community.

Conviction

Recently, I attended with a group of people a screening of the documentary film *Conviction* at Siena Heights University. The film recounts the events that led up to the arrests, convictions, and sentencing of three nuns (Sisters Ardeth Platte, OP (Order of Preachers); Jackie Hudson, OP; and Carol Gilbert, OP) whose “crime” amounted to a performance art piece at a nuclear missile site that was intended to send a message to American government officials that the people of earth need nuclear disarmament.

After viewing the film, our small group gathered around a table to talk about it. The group was composed of an executive assistant for a peace and social justice organization, a full-time mother

of three, a nun who works in South Africa with women impacted by AIDS in a community of eighty percent unemployment, two college students (history/religion and writing/religion), an organic farm worker, and a teacher. We talked about civil disobedience, the Sisters’ use of symbol, the “two Jesuses” of the Christian Fundamentalists and the Progressive Catholics, the use of religious writings in decisions about public policy, what role each of us intends to play in peace work, and the definition of success in such work.

As she faced a nearly three-year prison term for her actions, Sister Carol Gilbert was often asked if she thought of her work as “successful.” She said she didn’t think of it the way business people think of success. She talked in terms of future generations, about what she could say to future generations when asked, “Why were you complicit?” She referred to the indigenous concept of seven generations—the idea that we must consider our actions in terms of their effects on seven generations into the future. She talked about her sense of responsibility as a citizen of the earth community.

When I am asked to evaluate whether or not I’m successful in teaching American Literature classes in a high school where I have taught for over a decade, where nearly half of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch, I think about the ongoing, exhausting challenges: students with no or low motivation; absenteeism and truancy; mistrust of “the system” and of me because I’m an authority in it; the effects of substance abuse, domestic violence, and poverty.... Inevitably, some students will fail the course; some will drop out of school; some will disrupt and be sent to the principal’s office. Some will become parents; some will go to jail. Many will not pass the ACT or Michigan Merit Exam.

Success with this student population must focus on a sense of responsibility to the earth community, in terms of fostering human connections and a strong sense of community. I must constantly ask myself, “How can American Literature be structured and experienced so that students can

connect with themselves, with the local landscape, and with the community?"

Literary Connections

I have listened to all my classmates. I help them every day. I help Alicia, Jose, and Shannon the most. My classmates helped me to be a better teacher and listener. I think I have learned a lot from helping the people I do. I hope I have contributed to classmates. –Miguel

One way to foreground community (including people and land) is to begin the course with a text that has a strong community-related theme. In the Ojibwa legend, “The Forsaken Brother” (translated by Jane Johnston Schoolcraft), the youngest sibling turns into a wolf because his older siblings break their promise to their deceased parents to take care of their little brother. Beginning the course with this story situates the study of reading and writing in the family, the landscape, and the broader community and lays the groundwork for a conversation that will continue throughout the course about the positive and negative models of community members that literary characters provide. It leads into further conversations about making conscious decisions regarding the question, “What kind of community member do I want to be? What actions can I take to become that person?”

Many of the students in this course identify with the siblings in the story. Some students are the older siblings who begin to think about how well they are looking after the younger ones, and some are the younger ones who feel abandoned. We consider the Vietnamese, Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn’s request that we make ourselves into people that others can count on. We talk about how the younger brother found a new family and was transformed into a wolf, an animal that lives in community. We talk about actions we can do to find our helpers and friends in each other and in the world when we feel abandoned.

The Democracy of the Circle

The first day of class as I walked in, your desks were set up in a circle unlike any other classroom I had seen. –Jack

In *Reflections of a Citizen Teacher: Literacy, Democracy, and the Forgotten Students of Addison High*, Todd DeStigter urges teachers to “act in ways that further a democratic vision” (19). While school is often portrayed as the democratizing force in the lives of students, the reality is that schools often reinforce the social inequities of the larger community rather than dismantle the barriers that block the way to full economic and political participation by all students.

While school is often portrayed as the democratizing force in the lives of students, the reality is that schools often reinforce the social inequities of the larger community rather than dismantle the barriers that block the way to full economic and political participation by all students.

One of the most democratic community-building strategies available to teachers is amazingly simple, and yet, maybe because it is so simple it is often overlooked: arranging student desks in a circle significantly alters classroom dynamics. The circle evokes something in us that does not happen when the desks are in rows. Being surrounded by the same thirty people for twelve or twenty-four weeks works, I believe, works in a subtle way on the psyche. Every person can look into the eyes of every other person in the class. No one can hide. Those who have been invisible become visible.

I first began using the circle arrangement for class discussions about literature a few years ago, after I participated in a *Talking Circle* (cf. Wolf and Rickard) as part of a spiritual retreat led by elders from the Ute nation. Before my next class discussion, I went into the woods at a nearby park, found a stick that I liked, tied yellow, red, black, and white ribbons to it to symbolize the four directions (as I learned them from Lakota elders) and brought it to class. When it came time to discuss the literature, we pulled our desks into a circle and talked about the reading selections, following two simple rules: talk only when you have the stick; and speak honestly and respectfully from the heart. The circle arrangement communicates the idea that we

are all important members of a learning community in a *physical* way that doesn't happen when students look at the backs of their classmates from rows. It may not be able to address the barriers to full economic participation, but the circle is a powerful tool for dismantling social barriers.

Talking Circle: Nuts and Bolts

I do think that the Talking Circles contributed to my thinking about history. I think more about other people's past....I also feel that the Talking Circles will help me in my every day life. It will help me get a better understanding of someone I just met or a new work partner. It will also help me in society by helping me talk with people. –Miguel

As a teacher who strives to create a democratic learning community, I don't want to encourage class discussions that give the floor to a small, vocal minority. I want *every* student to participate in class discussion, and I want our conversations to be meaningful explorations of American history and culture as they connect to the lives we're living. I want the conversations that we have in Room A125 to be part of a learning experience that transforms lives. Talking Circle is a powerful tool in creating that kind of experience for students.

For each unit of study (approaching literature chronologically), a hand-out provided at the beginning of the unit provides the Talking Circle prompts to guide students' thinking over the two or three weeks when they're reading the selections, taking notes, and writing reading responses. Providing prompts ahead of time is a democratic practice, because it allows students plenty of time to think about what they'd like to say in Talking Circle, rather than giving the advantage to students who think and speak more quickly. In a classroom with a wide range of abilities, students need time to prepare and possibly try ideas out in less formal conversations before they speak to the whole group. Of course, this doesn't mean that every student takes advantage of this preparation time. In fact, many students, especially early in the trimester, do not look at the discussion prompts until it is actually time for the discussion to take place. Still, I remain committed to providing them with the opportunity to prepare ahead of

time, and as the trimester progresses, some students do begin to use the time to think about the prompts while they read the selections.

After using Talking Circles for class discussions for a number of years, I found that most students valued the opportunity to speak and listen. They consistently expressed a preference for this format as compared to other formats (teacher-led, fishbowl, etc.) for discussion in their written reflections. This led me to try the circle format for all my classes, all the time; the circle is a place to learn from one another.

Real People, Real Tough Issues

I believe that the eras that affected me the most are Modernist and Contemporary. The Modernist era really is an era...we all can relate to....The texts in this era...such as 'The Catcher in the Rye' by J. D. Salinger all express feelings of depression, isolation, and alienation. I often find myself having these feelings at this point in my life and I can relate to a lot of the characters in Modernist texts. –Martin

The transformation from strangers to family does not mean that the classroom community will be free of conflict. We're still working with people who have very difficult lives, people who are faced with such enormous challenges that it is difficult for them to focus on school. No, establishing a nurturing community does not mean that teaching general classes will be smooth sailing. That said, it is possible to work with students to create a classroom community that functions like a family to support each other and show respect in the face of differences of background, personality, and opinion.

Last year an ongoing situation in my first hour class was having negative affects on my classroom atmosphere and had begun to darken my mood for the entire day. Three bright, funny, and well-liked students in that class had developed a habit of making negative remarks about the class, about assignments, and about me in the transitional period between the mini-lesson and work time. The situation looked and felt like a discipline issue, but I suspected that the students were reacting to the discomfort they felt as they faced difficult academic tasks. Although they

deserved compassion for their discomfort, they also had a responsibility to their classmates. How could I encourage them to consider the negative role they were playing in the classroom community and help them feel empowered by bringing a positive attitude to our work together?

I made several attempts to get them to change their behavior: first, I talked to the whole class about the kind of environment we wanted to create and asked the students to consciously work on it with me. The negative behavior continued. Next, we looked at a behavior rubric that described appropriate and inappropriate classroom behavior. I asked students to be more conscious of their behavior in light of the rubric. No changes. Individual conversations with the students after class? Comments persisted, even when it cost participation points, even when classmates began to express minor annoyances that instructional time was focused on their behavior. Finally, calling on my developmental drama background, I created a role-play activity that I hoped would make the point clear to these students through direct experience.

The Classroom: A Community of Workers

I asked students to pair off and take roles as coworkers on a fictional job site. Partner A would be a worker who needs information from Partner B in order to get a job done. The students took a minute to agree on where they worked and what their other roles on the job would be. Then Partner A was directed to ask for their coworker's help in a way that they thought would motivate him or her to respond helpfully.

After the role-play, the students moved into two circles: Partner A and Partner B. I asked the students to go around the circle and report to their group how they had asked for help and what response they had received. The Partner B group discussed how they had been asked and what response they had given—and why—to Partner A's request. I asked for volunteers to report what they had noticed that seemed to create a good working relationship between the workers. Everyone seemed to agree that the best way for Partner A to be able to complete the task was to be respectful in making the request and appreciative of the help received.

At this point, I asked the group to consider something: that in the classroom, we are all workers—coworkers—who need each other's support to succeed. I

reminded the students that I, too, am their coworker and that I want the same kind of respect that Partner A would give to any coworker.

A few days later, I knew that the lesson had been successful when Hank, one of the students who had been making negative remarks, approached my desk before first hour to ask for something in a tone of voice that felt like he was making a demand rather than asking for my help. I didn't say a word, but I guess my face said plenty. Suddenly, he backed away from my desk and made gurgling sounds, as if he were a tape being rewound. On his second approach, he said, "Good morning, ms. eddy. How are you today? I was wondering if you could help me." I laughed and said I'd be glad to, and that I really appreciated his decision to change from a negative tone to a more positive one.

I didn't see the change take place in the other two "Negative Nancies," but I felt it. The role-play was the last time behavior was the focus of the lesson. For the remainder of the course, the lessons focused on course content.

The Strength of the Writer's Circle

My classmates have been a tremendous help for me this trimester. My classmates are diverse and gave me the chance to see how each of them approach writing several texts. I have seen some interesting texts from them, whether it was a short story, essay, or poem. Each and everyone of my classmates had his or her way of accomplishing their goals, especially with their multi-genre composition. —Martin

In late September I looked at the number of students who had completed their Genre Model Analysis assignment, and I knew I had a problem. In first hour, only a few had completed it, and in second hour, only two. Selecting and analyzing genre models is a crucial step in the writing process, giving students practice recognizing and using genre features in their own writing. It was time to revisit and reteach and call upon the strength of the community members to help each other over this wall.

When students came to class, I asked them to, "Please take out your Genre Model Analysis. This is a crucial step in completing the multi-genre project, because these models will provide you with ideas, tools and

techniques to use in your own pieces. We'll spend the class period working on it until everyone has it done."

I went around the circle again and again, conferencing with students about the five model (or mentor) texts they had selected to learn about writing in particular genres, whether they were fiction, nonfiction, poetry, television shows, or something else. A genre I hadn't thought of was online video games. A student asked if he could use *World of Warcraft* as a model. He said, "It's got a storyline."

"Yes, that works. What else?"

"It's set in ancient times; it has a plot."

"What about characters, mood, conflict?"

He began to write characteristics of the game on his paper. When he looked up, I gave him a "high five." "You've got it!" Then I moved on to the next raised hand.

Peter, Miguel, and Melanie were done with their analyses. Peter asked, "Can we help other people for extra credit?"

"Sure," I said. "Five points." The three of them began circling the room, helping classmates who were struggling. After a few minutes, all but a couple of students had completed the task, and those who were not yet finished understood what they needed to do. They said they had finish by morning.

Because so many had not completed the genre model analysis, most students were unable to begin using the information they had gathered while taking field notes at their research site earlier (a part of the multi-genre assignment described below). Amanda and Hank were the exceptions. I asked everyone to take a seat and explained that now we were ready to move forward to the next step: learning how to blend what we know about the research site with ideas about how to write from the genre models. I explained that I had seen their drafts earlier, so I knew that Amanda and Hank had done that. I said, "Now you'll hear how they use facts from their field notes and ideas from genre models to write new pieces."

I decided to turn recognizing the elements from genre models into a game. Before Amanda read her draft aloud, I called, "Who can tell what her genre model was?"

She only read a few lines before three students shouted, "I Have Killed the Deer!" (the title of a Tewa hunting song from the first unit of literature, Indigenous Texts.)

Another student observed, "She uses the circle

of life idea."

"Yes, exactly. Good. Now let's see if we can guess another."

Hank says, "You'll know it by the first line," and starts to read his draft. "Harry, look, a unicorn," Hermione whispers softly, pointing at the hidden creature in the trees."

He was right. Everyone knew immediately, but I asked anyway, and most of the students yelled, "Harry Potter!"

Hearing their classmates' examples had turned the lights on for many. Just before the bell rang, I shouted, "Show of hands if you understand how to use genre models." Two-thirds of the students raised their hands. I said, "Great work. We got a lot accomplished today. Go Maples."

Along with the writers whose works serve as genre models for the students, other important members of the writing community are those people the students designate as the audience for their multi-genre compositions. Many students identify family members as their audience, and we talk about what characteristics or interests to target in writing for that particular audience, emphasizing that, as writers, they are participating and contributing to the larger community.

The Circle of Life: All My Relations

Hey, what are you doing? Wait, please don't do that. It's not right... What did my brothers do to you? Nothing at all. We just eat, poop, and sing all day long. You can't go wrong with that. Okay, kid, I'll ask you one more time. Quit throwing rocks at me. I'm just a Blue Jay. -Miguel

The multi-genre composition is place-based, i.e. a homework assignment that includes visiting a self-selected outdoor site (e.g., a park, a back yard, a soccer field, a cemetery, a wetland sandwiched between mega-stores, a river, a garden) in order to gather information to shape a composition that is unified by a theme, by the writing, and by the artwork. Why an outdoor site? The quick answer? Mental health. No school has enough social workers available for students who struggle with all the aforementioned conditions and situations.

Human beings need unstructured experiences in nature for creativity, problem solving, stress-relief, relief of attention disorders, and a sense of well being (Louv, Orr, Stone and Barlow). Requiring students to spend thirty

to sixty minutes per week doing research at their sites gives them opportunities to learn through direct experience, observation, estimation, questioning, hypothesizing, describing, measuring, reflecting, and more, but also, outdoor assignments give students opportunities that no indoor or virtual assignment can give them: solitude, pleasurable sensations and feelings, and a sense of connection with nature, defined by E.O. Wilson as “biophilia,” and which is a sign of mental and physical health (Orr 132).

The time that students spend outside often strengthens their sense of connection to themselves and others. We can see the empathy that Miguel’s bird monologue illustrates (above), as his outdoor experiences led him to see life from the perspective of a small bird that was helpless to defend himself or his family members from some young boys who were throwing rocks. The practice of empathy for animals, an appreciation for his family, and a sense of calm are the benefits Miguel found in doing outdoor research. In his portfolio reflection, he says of the experience, “Before doing the project I didn’t think about my front yard...[as] interesting at all...Now I think it’s a nice place to talk with family. I feel like my yard is a totally new place....I learned that sitting or walking in my front yard and just listening to the animals calms me down. I’m more peaceful when I’m in my yard.”

Miguel’s observations illustrate one of the most important discoveries that students make while doing outdoor research: that perceptions change when we look at familiar things in new ways. This concept comes up frequently in classroom conversations, whether we’re discussing the landscape, the literary selections, or the larger society. In the context of the classroom community, it serves as a constant reminder to look at one another as we look at the natural world: with curiosity, empathy, and appreciation.

Conclusion

The Contemporary era is when writers...from all different cultures...wrote about how to grow through different life experiences, good or bad....Esperanza, from “The House on Mango Street” by Sandra Cisneros...feels like she cannot escape poverty on Mango Street but eventually realizes that no matter how bad it is, Mango Street will always be a part of her. I now battle tough times in my life which is why I believe I relate to this character. –Martin

When we foreground human connection in our teaching, it is possible to create a joyful, caring community of learners. I know this is true, because each year, I watch as my students transcend their perceptions of each other as “classmates” at best, or strangers--or worse, and come to see each other as “family.” On the last day of each trimester, we take time for a final Talking Circle to remember where we’ve been, what we’ve learned, and how we’ve grown. Like a family, we have memories that are painful as well as those that are hilarious—sometimes all at once. Like a family, what matters is that we go through it all together.

A couple of years ago, I had fallen behind in my end-of-term assignments, and the only day I would be able to get all the students together before summer vacation was exam day. At our school, exams are optional for students who have earned a B in the course and who have met the attendance requirement. A few days before exams, I made a special request. I said, “I know that several of you can opt out of the exam period for the class, but I’m going to ask you to come to class. I think it is important that since we started together, we end together. I won’t give a test. We’ll just have a chance to get together one more time before summer, and we’ll talk about some of the memories we’ve made in this class.”

I knew that those who could exempt might choose to do so, *and* I realized that students who had failed the course might opt out as well, but I hoped they wouldn’t. When exam day arrived, every student had come to class. I was pleasantly surprised, because a day when all class members were present was unusual in itself, but a day of full attendance when there was nothing at stake felt like a miracle. I was happy, and I said something to the students about how by showing up when they didn’t have to, they had given each other and me a very special gift.

When it was Will’s turn to speak, he said, “I’m glad ms. eddy made us do this. I think it’s a good thing to be together...you never know—next year at this time, one of us might not be sitting here...It could be your best friend.”

At first, I thought, “Hey, wait a minute! I didn’t *make* you do this. I simply asked.” Then, it dawned on me that around the circle heads were shaking in agreement with Will. He had hit upon something important. The community we had created together had become something that the students valued, something that would be missed. As I looked around

the circle, I could see that, like me, the students were genuinely sad to say goodbye. That, to me, is what success looks like in the general American Literature class.

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