

What Teaching Methods of Inquiry Taught Me

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Helping my students to think critically about social justice issues—the environment, poverty, race, prejudice and discrimination—has been a challenge for me as a teacher educator on an urban campus. I have aimed to get ELA pre-service teachers, a wonderfully diverse group, to question social inequalities they see rather than accept things the way they are. However, when it comes to gender, I have had to take a lesson from my students.

Last year I taught a course for the first time that was quite a change for me. It was not a teacher education course but had legacy as its theme: Celebrating Life and Leaving a Legacy. I planned to include a writing assignment about construction of gender identity but did not stop to consider LGBT youth in the class whose lives were shrouded in silence and might remain that way if no opportunity were provided to begin a conversation about gender and socially constructed identities. I was caught up in developing library resources and curriculum for freshmen and ways to think critically about legacy. I knew gender identities could be derived from books (Hartman, 2006) and that value could be gained from describing constructions of gender but never thought about how gay students might benefit from examples of characters in books or how straight students might be moved to develop identities with an expanded worldview, one that includes gayness defined in their own terms.

In this article, I describe a mini-unit I taught with first-year students in a course on foundations of inquiry designed to help them make a successful transition from high school to the intellectual challenge of college. This was the only course I taught all year that was not a teacher education course, and I watched with interest as students began

to recognize that knowing a lot would not do them much good unless they could do something with what they knew by turning it into an argument. I applauded as they learned to pay attention to what others said and wrote and began to summarize their arguments and assumptions. I did not, however, get to cheer as students had a light bulb moment for identifying how hegemonic heteronormativity is made and maintained, because no such moment took place. Looking back on planning for this course, I can think of ways that I might have encouraged my students to think about this more.

Overarching Theme

Students who registered for my section of the course knew that its theme would be Celebrating Life and Leaving a Legacy: How can I be remembered? I was pleased they explored this question when they anticipated themes in Green's novel *Looking for Alaska* and by reading and discussing poems: W. H. Auden's "As I Walked Out One Evening," Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Not So Far as the Forest," and Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." They thought about how the author regarded legacy when they discussed Randy Pausch's *Last Lecture* and when they used elements of reason to attempt to sort out whether Alaska's death had been accidental or suicidal.

But I was dismayed when I realized that relationships in both the novel and the memoir were heterosexual, so next time I will ask students to find evidence of diversity in these texts and in the poems, assuring them that in addition to race, class, and culture, they need to look for gender variance. I will work with these texts by encouraging students to find evidence that people enact sex, gender, and sexuality

continually as social constructs in each book and poem. They can reflect on many aspects of life that are socially constructed and gendered by listing roles performed around them and imagining alternate ways of being in the world. Suggesting to students that traditional power hierarchies exist and labels serve to police behavior within them, I will include a mini-lesson on the origin of such words as “fag,” a word that is sometimes used in a deliberately derogatory way but at other times without thinking. I hope to help students discover for themselves how heterosexuality is established as the only valid sexual orientation in each book and identify which voices are missing completely. As a feminist educator, I know the question to be beneficial, and am surprised that I did not think to ask it when the course ran the first time.

Goals in a Time Capsule

I started the course by asking everyone, “How are you going to live life to its fullest?” Students’ answers were to be stored on small bits of paper in a glass jar that served as a “time capsule”; they would be able to see how they had met their goals at the end of the semester when the time capsule was re-opened. Earlier the same day, they read “The Dash,” a poem by Linda Ellis, thought about what they might change in their lives, and watched a short video of one of Randy Pausch’s last speeches in which he says, “We don’t beat the reaper by living longer. We beat the reaper by living well.”

Asked about living life to its fullest, many students wrote that they wanted to “take risks and try new things.” Some added “without fear.” The next most frequently stated goal was to “meet new people and make new friends.” Several said they wanted to make a difference in the world, pushing themselves to “be great,” to “not give up, no matter how hard something may be,” to “not give up until [their] dreams are fulfilled,” or to “go an extra step to help others and defend what is morally and personally right.” A few students said they wanted to do what would make them happy “no matter what the cost,” to “do things with people that mattered [to them]” or to “do things that would make [them] happy.” One

person wrote “not to be scared to show who I am.” Several others stated they would “gain self control,” “make smart decisions,” “become more confident,” “work harder at school,” “do well in school,” or “find out what makes me, me.”

I opened the jar and began to read, wanting students to confidently pursue the goals I found but feeling concern for their safety at the same time. After reading the goals, I was ready to go ahead with the assignment of a written description of how they had constructed gender identities. The writing increased their awareness of their ability to exercise choice in their lives and conveyed the idea—to some for the first time—that gender is socially constructed.

Students had already talked about the protagonist in Green’s novel who as a young girl had lost her mother. Although Alaska may have regarded her mother as a role model, students hypothesized that the many books she read may well have influenced her to become the round character in the novel they liked very much. Alaska’s outspoken defense of women, her independent spirit, and the company of male friends who respected her collaboration as a prankster fascinated students. They were asked to consider which books, people, historic events or media had influenced them significantly when they constructed their gender identities. A few days later, they had written descriptions to turn in.

Constructing Gender Identity

An African American student responded by writing that when she was younger, her gender role models were the older women in her life. Her grandmother, great grandmother, mother and aunt were “strong, powerful, beautiful Black women who had shown [her] how to keep [her] head up, no matter what struggles arose.” Teasha (not her real name) was also drawn to the Williams sisters, Venus and Serena: “They caught my attention because I played tennis in high school, and I loved the fact that two Black women were dominating in that sport.” Her favorite relative was an uncle with whom she spent a lot of time going on long day trips: “We used to drive around everywhere,” she said. Her uncle became a

sitter for Teasha when her mother decided to go to college and continue to hold two jobs. She reflected,

Life experiences have influenced my ideas regarding gender the most. As we grow older and have different things happen to us and meet new people, our thoughts and ideas begin to change and our ideas begin to grow and take shape.

The statement may suggest competing discourses of femininity and a separation of what is acceptable for girls from what is acceptable for women, possibly an affirmation of the identity-acquisition process that Teasha went through as a girl when she was exposed to models of behaviors in natural settings she believed she needed to acquire to function but then put aside in exchange for a more active learning process based on life experiences that triggered conscious reflection and analysis. Both processes are acceptable to her, but one is appropriate for girls and the other for women.

Another student, a young woman from a rural southern town, claimed gender identity could be attributed largely to the influence of persons in her past rather than ongoing life experiences. Fanny singled out twin aunts as “big sisters” who took care of her when both of her parents worked as the ones she tried to copy because they seemed “cool.” She added her second grade teacher who was “such a caring person and made class fun for students.” She “really loved” her, she said, and returned to her classroom as a volunteer when she was in high school to find “it was just as good as I remembered it.” Fanny also looked up to her mother and said, “She has worked hard her entire life to give my sisters and me a good life. In elementary school, she always volunteered to go on our fieldtrips and all of my peers loved her. I already know I am like my mom, to be honest.”

A young woman in the class who came from a Midwestern middle-class suburb described her family as having the greatest influence in her construction of a gender identity:

I was never very feminine or masculine. My parents allowed me to try what I wanted and

create myself. My aunt is very sexy. She has always been good looking and an independent spirit. She is an RN and has supported herself and three sons. I am her namesake so she has always treated me like her daughter. I learned a lot from her. My sister-in-law taught me how to deal with life when it’s so hard and how to be an independent woman.

As a child, Vange was allowed to try out different gender roles, speaking her mind and standing up to other playmates or slowly beginning to develop more feminine characteristics to anticipate filling traditional roles as a wife and mother. Electing not to become passive and obedient, she suggested, Vange accomplished what seemed to be a kind of synthesis as she navigated her way to a gender identity that maximized independence. She rehearsed roles based on models in a process of trial and error that allowed her to analyze which roles to keep and which ones to discard.

Another student looked up to older girl cousins when she was younger but, in later life, she has revered Hillary Clinton “because she has overcome many things” and Drew Barrymore “who is also a very strong woman and has overcome drug addiction and a rough family background.” To characterize her construction of gender identity, Cally said, “It really became finalized going to an all-girls high school. We were taught that women could do anything and to be proud of being strong.”

The young women’s reflections demonstrated agency and the social construction of gender in each case. Male responses were much less detailed. They may not have thought about the topic as much as female students had. One student said he valued time with an uncle because he taught him how to hunt with a gun. Another claimed that his family, all of whom were very diverse, strong individuals, had had the greatest influence on his construction of gender identity. I believe I could do a better job of framing the assignment, since Alaska was the only example used when it was provided for students.

Had there been a sustained focus on gender in the course, writing tasks and dramatizations might have permitted male and female students to take a closer

look at the hard work people do to maintain gender, and how norms and systems of privilege are established and policed to keep heterosexuality as the only valid sexual orientation, thus marginalizing anyone who is not heterosexual.

Looking back on this first attempt to teach freshmen to think critically about how they can be remembered and the kinds of writing they produced, it can be said that one reflection on the construction of gender identity does not constitute a focus on gender nor does it provide a basis for personal and social change. Although the task of completing descriptions of factors and characters who helped students construct their gendered identities contributed to the important dialogical relationship between teacher and student and provided compelling examples, it led neither to personal awareness of sexuality nor to an open discussion of homophobia.

If I add a third book to the required readings in the mini-unit that opens the course, I will consider *Rainbow Boys* by Alex Sanchez. It is a book about three gay teens whose altered relationships with others and new understanding of themselves definitely merit investigation as a legacy. Gay freshmen in the class challenged to achieve an identity could benefit from seeing examples of what it is like to become aware of their sexuality. I am thinking students could complete a survey that would reveal their level of discomfort around the issue of gayness before reading the book. Once students had aired prejudices and stereotypes that distanced them from gayness, they could begin to generate their own questions about sexuality and participate in discussion. The next class will look different, especially if students do read *Rainbow Boys*. The class will be framed to open with gender from the start—and to open minds by the end of the semester.

References

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