

Reflecting on Pedagogy: Today's Student Is Tomorrow's Leader

David Cummings

Abstract

This article is intended as a deconstruction of my (the author's) perspective as a career-changer from comedian and actor to teacher that will deepen teachers' understanding of education beyond the classroom and after the school day. At the time of this article's writing, in my third school year teaching with the New York City Department of Education, it is my opinion that it is growing more and more urgent that we, as educators, do all we can to help shape today's students into responsible leaders to serve tomorrow's communities. During the short period of time we have with our students, we can model the behaviors we wish to see in our communities—not just for us but for future generations.

Keywords: pedagogy, praxis, teacher identity, empathy, education as activism

Introduction

As a history teacher, I am drawn to this quote by James Madison, fourth president of the United States: "The advancement and diffusion of knowledge . . . is the only guardian of true liberty" (Madison, 1825). This quote inspires me to motivate my students to be well informed and prepared to succeed in the world. In so many ways, I aim to emulate President Madison by instilling in my students the notion that education in itself is a form of activism.

Knowledge gives us the wherewithal to address a problematic issue head on, rather than hoping that someone, someday will address it for us. Our knowledge informs everything we do as teachers and, if we apply it wisely, it will pay off in the future actions of our students. Understanding how I can best use teacher and student knowledge enables me to empower my students to embody the change they wish to see in the world. With President Madison's quote in mind, I tell my students that, if they want to make a change in their communities, it is important not only that they vote but that they run for office.

As Bartlett (2005) wrote, "Educators must develop radical pedagogical structures that provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis of literacy. This includes, obviously, the language they bring to the classroom" (p. 346). As teachers, it is our responsibility to teach our students how to look at their communities from multiple perspectives and viewpoints. Once they learn how to assess and deconstruct a situation or challenge, they can determine how best to address or overcome it.

Bartlett (2005) also stated that "knowledge is not a piece of data, something immobilized, concluded, finished, something to be transferred by one who acquired it to one who still does not possess it" (p. 346). Too often society thinks of knowledge as a collection of facts and data. This is the very basis of "teaching to the test," of measuring student achievement based on test scores. Knowledge is correctly viewed as information that enables us to function, achieve, and accomplish goals. Through coursework, professional experience, and connections with colleagues, today's educators are armed with strategies and pedagogical techniques to react and respond to the ideals at the forefront of transforming education in service of our students.

In this paper, I identify three main points that I use to demonstrate the skills I developed and sharpened during my graduate school years. These skills, which are greatly beneficial to my pedagogy, have helped me to form my teacher identity, my curricular aims, and to grow my inquiry process. All have had a noteworthy impact on my progress toward mastery of knowledge and praxis

In my Master's coursework, I was tasked with identifying and informing my teacher identity since who I am, where I come from, and how I identify inherently affect how I relate to, interact with, and

support my students. Investigating who I am and how I carry myself enables me to understand how my teacher identity can negatively or positively affect my relationships with students. My current location in New York City often informs my teacher identity. I was surprised to learn, for example, that students can navigate the transit system by themselves or buy breakfast at a bodega on their way to school. These are experiences I never had growing up. These differences enable me to engage students in the concept of place and to emphasize how important it is for them to take advantage of all the benefits afforded them simply by living in the city.

It has been difficult for me to separate my identity from my upbringing in the South and the Southern perspective on current or historic events. It was due to a “cultural conflict” that I, a White male from the southern United States, ended up teaching in New York City. Without being aware of it, culturally responsive pedagogy greatly influenced my professional transition.

In my Master’s coursework, I was introduced to the work of Lisa Delpit (2020), who stresses the need to address stereotypes in the classroom:

We have to inundate the conscious mind with ideas to reprogram the unconscious mind. We have to give ourselves and our students new stories that uncover the brilliance they exhibited as babies . . . And we have to replace the stereotypes that caused their brains to shut down or have so traumatized them emotionally that they have nothing left for academics. (Delpit, as cited in Giegerich 2020, para. 2)

It is only by addressing stereotypes head on that we can quell them and mitigate their impact, both inside and outside the classroom. By demonstrating that stereotypes are not accurate depictions of those they demean, I can help offset the impact of such notions. Replacing the stereotypes that harangue and plague so many learners is why the educator’s job is so vital to our society.

Gloria Ladson-Billings’ tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy go a long way in fighting the battles our students face each school year. Offering culturally relevant pedagogy teaches students how to interpret and solve problems in an academic setting, emphasizes the importance of their culture and that of others, and gives them the skills they need to address significant issues that arise outside the classroom. Ladson-Billings has given educators in urban settings a blueprint for engaging and encouraging today’s learners to be tomorrow’s difference-makers.

I explored these concepts during my studies and while composing the K.E.E.P.S. Claim essay required to earn my Master’s degree. The essay demonstrates how an educator will employ and improve five aspects of their pedagogy: Knowledge, Enquiry, Empathy, Pluralism, and Social Commitment. Knowledge refers to intellectual inquisitiveness in the context of our teaching; inquiry is the need for feedback and constructive criticism of our practice and our students’ work; empathy emphasizes the importance of meeting the needs of each student and striving to serve them to the best of your ability. Pluralism is the idea of inclusiveness and a celebration of the differences that make every school community unique. Social commitment, the final component of my essay, highlights the importance of working toward a greater good and investing in the future of society by excelling as an educator.

By identifying and examining my inquiry process in one graduate school course, I came to realize that it is more than just the way I write my lessons or construct assessments. My inquiry process is a way to use the skills that best serve my pedagogy while also identifying and addressing areas I can develop further. For example, I can rely on my sharp relationship-building skills to serve a struggling student by asking for help from a teacher more skilled than I at analyzing student test scores and assessments.

I used my inquiry process to identify a previous student’s (let’s call him Randall) potential trouble areas for the new school year. He was still not asking for help, and his academic performance on the formative assessments backed up my suspicions. My process led me to work with the seventh-grade team to see if Randall’s issue was confined to social studies or if it was occurring in other classrooms. When I heard similar stories from his English language arts, math, and other teachers, I

sprang into action to construct supports that I thought would serve his personality most effectively. For example, Randall does not want the attention that comes with asking for help in class, so I had him come to my classroom for additional support during his lunch period. When this proved effective, I decided to raise the stakes by inviting him to take part in the peer tutoring program, which replaces one recess period a week, during which students seek or offer academic support from or to classmates. I first invited Randall to get support from his classmates, and then suggested that he offer support to others. This strategy paid off, and Randall eventually found that he was learning by teaching his classmates who were struggling similarly.

Whereas I relied on my prior rapport with Randall and kept an eye out for a repeat of his struggles before using the data to alter his instruction, I feel that some educators might have relied more on the assessment data, on formal observation in other classrooms, or on a one-on-one interview with him. Relying on data or observations is an impersonal manner of helping a struggling student. While teaching Randall in the previous school year, I recognized that he performs better on an assessment if he can relax beforehand. As such, I would ask him to relax with a book or computer game in the recess the period before a quiz. However, this process did not appear on his report card, which illustrates that the importance of anecdotal evidence and personal rapport with a student cannot be computed.

Identifying students' weak spots or areas for growth is the crux of teacher knowledge. The more I improve areas where I am lacking, the better my praxis becomes, which in turn better serves my students. I had a graduate school professor who helped me set and scrutinize my teaching goals by exploring my curricular aims. In this course, I sat with specific areas for improvement within my pedagogy and developed strategies for incorporating scaffolds, which would positively impact my teaching practices. My goals can directly impact my students' goals, which will serve them throughout their academic careers and beyond. The way that people learn best is by participating actively in the coursework and materials. Hansen et al. (2017) wrote about educator Madeline Hunter, who developed the mastery teaching model, "to encourage students to attain stated outcomes or objectives deemed relevant for mastery" (p. 45).

Learning by doing in the classroom is essential to creating a memory that could last a lifetime. When my seventh-grade social studies students are learning about the atrocities that took place when Christopher Columbus enslaved the Taíno indigenous people, they engage with the material by participating in a mock court case—more or less *The Tainos v. Columbus et al.* The assignment could easily have been to do a reading and then draft a short essay and take a quiz. However, the students will be more likely to remember the lesson because of the opportunity I created for them to actively engage with the material by acting it out.

Identifying students' weak spots or areas for growth is the crux of teacher knowledge. Moreover, the more I improve the areas where I am lacking, the better my praxis becomes, which in turn is better for my students. This reminds me of a quote from Benjamin Franklin (1746): "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn." By designing educational experiences rather than simply teaching to the test, we are actively creating the kind of experience that is the very purpose of education. As teachers, we want our students to leave the classroom with the tools they need to become informed citizens.

I became a teacher after the birth of my now four-year-old daughter. My goals for my students matter more than ever because they will affect the world in which my daughter will be living. Once she was born, I had real skin in the game and did not want to reach retirement age still just complaining about the country's state of affairs. I wanted to know that I had played a part in shaping the generation of people my daughter will work with and work for, the people she will date and perhaps one day marry. The goals I have for my students are rooted in their ability to make informed decisions without relying on others to tell them what to do, how to think or feel, and (very importantly) for whom to vote. I impress upon my students that they should not just take my word on something they think might be incorrect. I want them to call me on it and find the evidence to prove me wrong! Having that kind of intellectual courage is my main goal for my students. The very success of my career and the effectiveness of my teaching rely on how well I have formed my

teacher identity. By constantly improving my inquiry process, I am improving as an educator. I have become the teacher I am today because of the skills I have learned through my connections with colleagues, my ongoing professional development sessions, and my persistent effort to improve as an educator.

References

Bartlett, L. (2005). Dialogue, knowledge, and teacher-student relations: Freirean pedagogy in theory and practice. *Comparative Education Review*, 49(3), 344-364.

Hansen, L., McCollum, M., Paulsen, S., Cyr, T., Jarvis, C., Tate, G., & Altieri, R. (2017). Evaluation of an evidence-based peer teaching assessment program. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 71(3), 1-7.

Madison, J. (1825). Letter to George Thomson, 30 June 1825. On file with *The James Madison Papers* at The Library of Congress.

Giegerich, S. (2020, July 15). Telling young people better stories about themselves: At TC's Reimagining Education Institute, Lisa Delpit demands narratives that 'uncover students' brilliance.' *Teachers College Newsroom*. Available from <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/articles/2020/july/telling-young-people-better-stories-about-themselves/>

Waitoller, F. R., & Thorius, K. J. (2016). Cross-pollinating culturally sustaining pedagogy and universal design for learning: Toward an inclusive pedagogy that accounts for dis/ability. *Harvard Educational Review*, 86(3), 366-389.

.....

David C. Cummings holds a bachelor of psychology degree from Touro College in New York City and a master's of science in education from Long Island University in Brooklyn. He is an active member of Psi Chi, The International Honor Society in Psychology. David is a special education teacher with the New York City Department of Education. He was formerly a comedian and actor, and is now a loving husband and the doting father of an adorable daughter.