Remembering to be Real: Not planning but finding Authentic Teaching—A *Currere* Reflection

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After visiting a class discussing Supreme Court Cases, what struck me most was the wide range of questions students asked. Could a person's trash be examined by a police officer, and if something illegal was found, could it warrant an arrest? An authentic question raised with a candid response offered by both teacher and student in real conversation. As Jago (2019) states, "Asking good questions is at the heart of good teaching" (p. 104). Students learn in context. The teacher listens and responds from student experiences connecting their lives to the discussion. How often do we as teachers open spaces of authentic, experiential teaching? I lead with a powerful example: Teaching in a rural high school in Hanford, California.

First Step: The Regressive Moment

Class has not started. While waiting, an older, mid-fifties Hispanic custodian enters my room using little language, simply motioning me to follow. Startled, I walk with him down the hall. He holds a broom and guides me rather quickly to a spot in the center in the hallway where he places the broom upright and says, "Look at all this!" He stretches with his long arm to what is lying in the center of the hallway—scattered mess. I notice a large blanket, red with tattered edges and holes. Another blanket is quite small, like for a child, with a cartoon rabbit. I see a box of Cheerios, baby formula, various sets of shorts, V-neck shirts, and a rained-on pink baby bag with a few bottles thrown around the hallway, some with dried milk in them. There is also an old language arts textbook, the cover barely on, a science text, some wire-ringed notebooks, plastic bags, assorted food containers, and a metallic gold journal. The janitor gestures with hands rugged from hard work and says, "I found this…," there was a pause, "on the roof." I say, "On the roof?" "Yeah, it was buried in some grooves above your classroom." He explains the cleaning crews had not been on the roof for years. I help him throw away the blankets, bottles, even the books (I never throw away books), but I keep the yellow journal and return to class.

I open the journal dated 12 years prior, 1992. It tells of a young lady through the 11 entries more like a diary. She writes as if I knew her situation of a verbally abusive father and a physically abusive boyfriend. Outside of a few lines about hiding at the school, never mentioning the roof, there aren't many comments about her baby. It is clear she was afraid. My students enter the room as the bell rings.

A young lady in the third row asks what I am reading, and I simply begin reading aloud. I read, and they listen, without interruption, stone quiet. And then, a flood of questions I can't answer. Who was she? Should we give the journal to the police? Is she still in harm? Who is her father? Is she White? Is she Spanish? We talk about how she "sounded"—Hispanic. The questions continue until the bell rings.

I, like my students, want to know more. I do not plan to teach lessons with this journal, but I do. It is authentic, based on the real accounts of one of their peers. They are invested. The questions come every day, so I plan a new way to respond to the journal. Students from other classes, ones who I have never seen, read the journal and ask more questions. Each day, we write responses to the journal. We use voice and point of view. talk about setting, and most of all, wrestle with what to do. Reluctant

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students engage. I am not sure how we ended this, but I remember this kind of engagement is something that I wanted for every lesson.

Second Step: The Progressive Moment

What struck me most was the authentic learning experienced through teaching and mediating students (Vygotsky, 1978). Moll (2000) summarizes the centrality of mediation to learning as follows:

> To put it simply, human beings interact with their worlds primarily through mediational means; and these mediational means, the use of cultural artifacts, tools and symbols, including language, play crucial roles in the formation of human intellectual capacities. (p. 257)

Language served as a tool to create a space for authentic discourse. I see mediation as working with a problem and using the language of inquiry to address it together—students engaged in inquiry from a teen's language fueling collective inquiry. Language is "the tool of tools" (Dewey, 1925/1981, p. 134). Open inquiry encourages authentic connection.

Inquiry-based learning generates this type of conversation. Educators often insist on prescribed plans that adhere to state standards and do not consider developing plans around questions. We need to call for discovery over correctness. A classroom should invite discovery, exploration together, and collective learning in a way that we are on fire for learning.

My question is, can this type of fire be planned? Can we teach with that zeal for learning or zest for involvement? This experience showed me, first hand, the value of experiential learning and inquiry. Considering this value, perhaps in addition to teaching our students how to plan lessons, we need to teach them to plan away from the lessons. There is no formula for learning. Teachers need to prepare for change and mediation of that change. This requires the educator to respond and transform. Drama educator Cecily O'Neill (1989) states:

> The teacher/artist requires flexibility, ingenuity, personal creativity and an ability to exploit opportunities as they occur. To carry out the kind of teaching which is transformative and dialogic, the teacher as artist will also need curiosity, the ability to focus on critical reflection, the strength to cope with uneasiness, uncertainty, and unpredictability, and considerable tolerance of ambiguity. (p. 154)

With the journal, I could have stopped reading it, put it down, and taught my plan for the class. Instead, I recognized, with my students, that a great deal of reflection, writing, and unanswered questions arose from the found text. I developed three weeks of curriculum as a central text for learning. I was flexible, and my real plans came from the needs of the classroom and not necessarily a state mandate.

Flexible Teaching

Considering this, how flexible am I as an educator? Was I flexible enough in teaching with this journal? I wish that we had had a deeper conversation on what it was in the journal that made them think it was written about a Hispanic family. What language made them think that was so? We accepted a Hispanic voice, but we did not discuss the language, customs, culture that evoked this understanding. If I had

addressed these questions, I would have elevated the conversation to address issues of race, equity, and perhaps personal experiences connected to these issues. The system of learning that is school generally does not invite these conversations. As Minor (2019) states,

> Anytime an operating system—like a school or a curriculum—consistently fails a specific subset of people, there is not something wrong with the people (in this case, children). There is something wrong with the system—the institution or the curriculum. (p. 45)

It makes me wonder, as an educator, why I don't dig deeper into issues that are more authentic in the classroom? Am I restricting this reflection because it is not what is done in school, or do I feel unprepared to address it? Addressing these issues might have led to a conversation of what a white person might not see and might speak to issues of privilege, access, and problems with "equality" over equity. At the time, I was not ready to make these issues part of my lessons. However, I am slowly learning how important it is to make these issues visible in the classroom and that, even if they are not in the plans, they must be seen and discussed. As I prepare preservice educators, I model this and explain why I am doing so.

Identity

By discussing these issues, we give students voice. Students need to have agency in their lives. Sarah Ahmed (2018) argues that student identity is essential in an authentic classroom. She warns that others are trying to impose identity on our students, but in an authentic classroom, they have space to voice their selves. They can speak to who they are and not how newspapers or even their peers assume they are.

> The world assigns or questions our identity constantly, whether explicitly or implicitly; images and headlines tell us who is dangerous and whom we should fear...we can position kids in such a way they can and will shout who they are from the rooftop. (Ahmed, 2018, p. 63)

These talks are occurring. The talks did not occur during class time. I remember many Hispanic students, some field workers, in private, shared out loud with me about how they feel displaced. Sometimes, they would write short journal entries. Did these students only feel safe or comfortable talking to me in the hallways and sometimes in their own writing? If I made more authentic spaces for these students to speak, they may have found more of their voice so others would experience and understand the inequity, perhaps not shouting from the rooftops, but at least being heard, and just as important, their classmates listening. This class was called creative writing, but was I restricting them from finding their voice by not making more dialogic spaces for them to dialog around issues that matter? Part of being creative is understanding who you are and how you can make your stand with your voice.

Lesson Planning

In hindsight, I valued this teaching but could have used it for more engagement. I felt pressured to "move on" from a school mindset thinking of standards and, because the learning was not from a text, deciding it might be not be essential. It was powerful learning that helped to build classroom community. As Maxine Greene (1995) states, "Community is a question of what might contribute to the pursuit of shared goals;

what ways of being together, of affirming mutuality, of reaching toward some common world" (p. 39). The diary became a critical learning lesson worth further reflection, even though it was not a planned lesson. Perhaps this personal, authentic story was enough to make room for my students' own stories.

Not everything that needs to be taught is tied to a lesson plan, but it can be the impetus that creates invaluable lessons for learning. Although I don't intentionally mean to do this, I can be a gate keeper to what students learn. How can I be more open to what they want to know and not always what they need to know? This is worth examining. There are outside pressures to move away from authentic learning, but I need to look for this more and answer to it for my students.

Third Step: The Analytical Moment

As a beginning teacher in 1990, I was told a lesson plan needed to be both critical and effective. Teaching was not possible without both. My teaching plan was more important than student inquiry. I would silence my students because the plan dictates something else. Slowly, I have changed this approach to teaching.

Planning from Inquiry—Strategy Planning

The idea of school restricted my students. For over 10 years, I have studied how to build from inquiry. As Jerome Harste (1990) said in a speech in Hawaii on rethinking schools, "One possibility for reforming schooling is to build curriculum around the inquiry questions of learners" (n.p.).

I have taught lessons without a prescriptive plan but instead developed my teaching from deep listening to the needs of my classes. From this, "strategy plans" have been developed. I plan strategies to invite spaces for reflection, deeper thinking, and connections to curriculum. In planning, I spend more time on "what if," "imagine," and "I wonder if" than exactly outlining all the specific "what" of the plan. With the diary, I asked, "What if I could address the family relations of the person in the diary?" "Imagine if the diary was written today. How would it change?" and "If we could talk to the police, what would we say?" As Jago stated, good questions make good teaching. Why not design plans around possibilities and strategies from questions, instead teaching from plans that sound like an instruction manual?

Perhaps we silence the authentic discourse that is available in the class when we plan for every bit of time in a lesson. Instead, we need to make space for questions and discourse from our students. Lois Weis (2003) in the book, *Silenced Voices and Extraordinary Conversations*, states, "We must listen closely to the 'discursive underground'—to the 'political critics' who have little access to the centers of power and privilege" (p. 69).

I needed to listen to what I didn't know. My previous plan making did not account for this. I need to listen to student stories. As Minor (2019) states, "any narrative that mutes or denies imperfection silences and refuses our essential humanity" (p. 4). As I change my lesson plan, I want to open spaces for all.

Syllabus

One way we possibly limit authenticity is when we design a syllabus that speaks to what we do every day and are not provided the freedom to change it. The syllabus prescribes what we teach, but does it also limit learning? For example, in the Supreme Court Case class, I could see how students wanted to talk about a local incident and legal ramifications from it, but this was not explored. An African American student asked, "Was the person black or white?" This teacher replied, "It should not matter

with the law." However, it often does. This was an effective space to discuss bias, something that can affect my students, some on a daily basis.

Afterwards, I talked with my student and the cooperating teacher, and I mentioned this, and the reply from the cooperating teacher was, "We don't have time to discuss it." He went on to tell me about the mandates of the syllabus. Afterwards, I talked with my students and said, "Imagine what the conversation would have sounded like if you were provided this conversation." We had a great conversation about how, if it was his classroom, he can change to accentuate this as part of the classroom and relate it to past history that they were studying at the time.

This student wanted to discuss in the class the fact that those who manage the law can be biased and, according to statistics, are to Black people. As Ahmed (2018) states, "it is important to talk about bias because we can't work against something that we don't know exists" (p. 45). We need to be able to discuss the inequity that can interfere with justice for people of color. Where else can students safely address these issues? The authentic classroom is a place for this to happen. But, the teacher must take risks, and the students also must feel comfortable to risk their thinking. How often do I encourage risk taking as I teach? How often do I share a place where we can step out of the lesson so that we can step into deeper learning?

Rubrics

Outside of the syllabus possibly restricting inquiry, so does the mindset of creating a lesson that always has to be attached to a rubric. Some students argue with me that all learning should have rubrics attached to it. I seriously wonder about this. How much of learning is not on a rubric? Teaching comes from reflection before, during, and after the lesson and not simply from a formalized, often detached, rubric. I want my students to recognize the possibilities in teaching that are not planned. This is not saying they don't plan, but instead, we need to plan for recognizing inquiry and answering to our students' questions. How often is learning dismissed in lieu of a rush to finish?

Having defined syllabi and rubrics can be confining to our teaching. As we systemize learning, how often do we lose what can't be systemized—zeal, zest, curiosity—in my students? It is worth reflection.

Next step: The Synthetical Moment

If the syllabus is our blueprint for a class, I need to revisit mine. Instead, where do I state that my students are allowed to veer from a lesson plan? However, I want them to be able to address why they make this teaching move. They can reflect when something they did not plan moved students to question, learn, and reflect. Some veteran educators may argue that this is implied in teaching. It is not. We need to help students recognize places for transformation, even when they are beginning to teach.

My Own Teaching

The first place I need to echo this is in my own teaching. When I first started learning about the practice of teaching, it was kept in secret. You did not share with students why you made a teaching move; you spoke to the content you were addressing. However, students respond better when they know why you are doing something. I am slowly finding more places to say, "Because of your comment yesterday, Anderson, I changed my plans, and this is why." I am also realizing that one curious student can invite the whole class to be curious. And, when students ask questions, replying that we are talking about something else right now is not always

the right response. I need to plan and share how I react when something said moves us to discovery and how teaching from the discovery can be rewarding. There are times when I need to resist the pressure to "move on" but instead address and, in some cases, change the lesson. After all, my students are watching, and if I simply stay with a prescriptive syllabus or define teaching from a rubric as my blueprint, they may model this.

As Minor (2019) states, "Here, we recognize that teaching is not monologue. It is dialogue. And after hearing what kids have to say, I've got to do something" (p. 17). And that something is reaching, in an authentic manner, to respond to my students. I want class to be authentic every day, and if that means we need to take a bit more time to do so, it is real. Being real is more important than being on time.

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