Beyond Presence: The Importance of Being Seen

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As an educator, I believe that much more than content area learning takes place in a classroom. We build a community in which students learn to question, engage with others, explore new ideas, speak for themselves, consider their values, and connect with people and ideas that move them. I have always encouraged my students to be themselves and tried to build a community in which it is acceptable, even encouraged, to question the norm, to wonder *what if*, or to disagree. I want my students to advocate for themselves, to push themselves through uncomfortable thoughts, and to take intellectual risks. This is especially important to me as a teacher of English language learners because if they feel afraid or unwelcome and avoid these risks their engagement will be limited. Their voices will not be heard, and it will also deprive others of the opportunity to learn from them. As I do this, I realize that I too can struggle with these same notions when I am a newcomer to a group. Yet I persist. What has made building community a cornerstone of my pedagogy?

Pinar (2011) advocated for a search within the self, challenging us to examine our lived curriculum in order to gain insight or transformation. He calls this *currere*. According to Pinar (2011), *currere* "provides a strategy for students of curriculum to study the relations between academic knowledge and life history in the interests of self-understanding and social reconstruction" (p. 44). Utilizing *currere* has enabled me to deliberate on my own praxis.

Invisibility

Sophomore year. Sitting in homeroom, I slid my finger under the flap of the yellow envelope and dislodged my first quarter report card. Glaring at me from the page was a boldfaced letter **F** in World History. I felt the world stop. After a quick check to be certain that I had received the correct envelope—yes, my name was typed at the top of the report card—only the **F** remained visible. I felt as if I were drowning—the world went blurry and silent. My thoughts raced. *How could this be? I thought I was a good student ... I always sat quietly and respectfully, even as Mr. Kraft droned on about William the Conqueror. I completed my homework on time. I generally performed well on tests.* While the currents of my mind churned through possibilities, emotions swirled: shame, fear, confusion, self-doubt. I didn't know how to explain this to my parents. I didn't know what this meant for my future. My chest tightened, and I stifled a cry.

My parents were disappointed, and they questioned what had happened. When I had no answers, they demanded to see my notebook so we could work through the problems together. I stared at the still crisp corners of the red folder and began to pull papers from the pockets: B+ on a unit test, A's on weekly writing assignments, checkmarks indicating satisfactory homework completion. It didn't make sense. My parents said that I needed to take my notebook to my teacher and figure out what was missing. The tightness in my chest moved to a burning in my stomach. Confrontation is not in my nature. I didn't think it was my place to question a teacher; rather my duty was to follow directions and learn from him. However, if I were going to correct this problem, I needed to know what I was doing wrong.

The next day I stayed after class to talk with Mr. Kraft. He showed me my grades, scrawled across the pages in his black gradebook and pronounced my work

Edwards, J. F. (2021). Beyond presence: The importance of being seen. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *5*(1), 61–65.

"unsatisfactory." I mustered the courage to say that I thought I had done better. The work in my folder showed good grades, not the string of zeros in his book. He harrumphed and glared at me over the black rims of his glasses while I handed him my work. As he compared the contents of my folder to the work in his gradebook, his brow furrowed. "Where did you get this?" he scoffed. "We will talk more about this tomorrow." He took my folder and dismissed me. He accused me of cheating, of putting my name on someone else's work. It was devastating. My mother came to school the next day to meet with him. The guidance counselor got involved. To make a long story short, he didn't know my name. After nine weeks in his classroom, my quiet respectfulness had hidden me rather than led to acknowledgement. He had confused me with another student and recorded her grades in the row of the ledger marked "Jennifer."

At the time, I reacted with relief. The mistake was corrected, and I was assured that I was a "good student." This is now one of the only school memories from high school that sticks with me. As Pinar (2011) stated, "Always academic, curriculum is also subjective and social" (p. 43). I don't remember any content from Mr. Kraft's class, but what remains with me is how I felt—about school and about myself. Those few days invested in correcting a teacher's error were a critical moment in which I learned that it is important to be seen, heard, and known.

Vision

As a teacher who works primarily with international students, relationships and community are particularly important to me. My classroom is one of the first introductions my students have to American culture and the American university experience. I want their experience to be a positive one, one in which they feel validated, welcomed, and confident that they have made the correct decision. Without relationships, this cannot happen.

International students cope with many of the traditional first-year student concerns—homesickness, loneliness, anxiety about grades—but they experience it all in a new language and a new culture. This can be intimidating. In particular, the political climate has affected their sense of Otherness. In the past five years, they have faced so-called "Muslim bans" and chants of "Build the wall!" They have been subjected to consternation and suspicion resulting from political accusations of election interference and conspiracy theories about the origin of the coronavirus. Yet, they persist. It's hard to imagine the future in the midst of a global pandemic and strained political relationships between the U.S. and many of their home countries. However, for international students who continue their study abroad experiences, I envision them becoming an integral part of the campus culture.

We must create an inclusive campus community in which we honor difference while we collaborate to construct knowledge and build understanding. Although familiarity with the English language factors significantly in international students' experiences, relevance of study and a sense of belonging also affect their engagement and empowerment (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014). Classrooms and campuses must establish trust in order to nurture an inclusive environment where all students feel validated and, as Amy Lee (2017) wrote, "have better opportunities to learn in ways that reflect, utilize, and value who they are" (p. 16).

I envision a campus in which international students are recognized as assets to the community whose knowledge and experience are deemed integral to the educational experience. I imagine communities of diverse learners collaborating to build shared understanding and produce new knowledge through inquiry and critical reflection. It is not sufficient to integrate these students into the current structure of the university.

We should work to transform higher education in order to grant them full inclusion and the freedom to be themselves, thereby, progressing toward a truly internationalized education and global society. This is a lofty goal and not one that can be achieved quickly or individually, so I must consider how I can contribute to progress toward this ideal. I want culturally and linguistically diverse students to learn as well as share, to enrich our community with their knowledge and experiences, to build relationships across cultures and lead to improved understanding of humanity. By knowing, we will be less isolated. By communicating, we can understand and bridge differences.

Insight

As Dewey (1938/2015) wrote, "education is a development within, by, and for experience" (p. 28). What a person learns in any given situation helps one understand other experiences in a variety of ways. Each moment can inspire or restrict actions, reinforce or alter expectations, motivate or confuse decisions, and encourage or discourage engagement. My experience with Mr. Kraft contributed as much to my pedagogy as any of the teacher preparation courses I took in college.

As I revisit my 16-year-old self who had been accused of cheating by a history teacher who did not know her name, I remember the overwhelming emotions. At first, I felt confused because I assumed that the teacher was correct. I didn't understand how I had done so poorly when my past efforts in school had always been successful. It filled me with self-doubt. Because I trusted the institution more than I trusted myself, I was afraid to question my teacher. Upon reflection, I feel ashamed that I allowed the situation to cause me to doubt myself, and I feel angry that everyone (including myself) thought I must have been the one who made a mistake. Of course, teachers are fallible—just like all humans—but this was a significant error. To not know a student's name after nine weeks? To mis-record numerous grades by the wrong name? This moment gave me the resolve to ensure that my students would never feel so invisible or powerless.

Inclusion means more than being present in a space; it means contributing as a valued member. I work to combat the perceptions of students as "receivers" of knowledge. I want their learning to be personally meaningful and useful. I want my students to be active learners who take part in designing the curriculum, who have autonomy to design projects and choose supporting resources that are relevant to their goals and ambitions. As Lee (2017) explained, "an intercultural classroom must actively invite and productively engage multiple perspectives and ways of seeing" (p. 102). These are my intentions as I work toward my vision of an inclusive campus. Although my contributions may be small, they can be meaningful. To build an inclusive classroom, my focus is developing community: community in the classroom, imagined community, and communities of practice.

Classroom community depends on the establishment of trust and respect. I remember how it felt to be mischaracterized as a cheater because I was truly unknown, so I work diligently to build relationships with my students. I begin by learning each student's name and its correct pronunciation. I also seek opportunities to learn about their interests, backgrounds, hobbies, goals, and ideas, and I work to include those in the class activities. This contributes to a sense of belonging, and belonging is foundational to the human experience. Furthermore, for international students, a sense of belonging has been found to improve confidence and increase interaction and performance in the classroom (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014). I want students to feel comfortable asking questions, so I model curiosity, and when I do not know something, I admit it, and we seek the answers together. Students also need to build relationships with one another, so I incorporate group work into class activities. This environment, in which teachers and

students support each other and collaborate as contributors to knowledge construction, is central to my practice.

In the literature related to second language learning, one often reads about "imagined community" (Norton, 2013). This means that students are able to envision themselves actively engaging with others using the target language. Being able to see oneself this way contributes to their investment in language learning, and it can also be influential to their academic achievement. My international students often discuss making American friends as one of their primary goals, even before they define their professional aspirations. I seek ways to relate our classes to this goal by building intercultural relationships so that they can bridge from an imagined community to an achieved community. For several years, I have fostered intercultural collaborations by pairing my ESL classes with teacher education classes. These intercultural groups collaborate on several academic assignments together and then extend their relationships through cultural and social experiences such as international festivals, community dinners, bowling, and ropes challenge courses. These experiences provide opportunities to learn about different cultures and to build friendships by discovering similar interests. These relationships benefit everyone involved. The teacher education students often gain a better understanding of the challenges students face when studying in a new culture and language, and they feel better prepared to consider diverse backgrounds, skills, and experiences in their lesson planning. The international students most often reflect on the collaborations as a way to build friendships with people they probably would not have otherwise met on campus. They enjoy learning about the culture, getting advice from their partners about campus life, and conversing about topics including academic classes, movies, music, sports, and even politics or religion. These activities expand communities across campus.

Another aspect of language learning is developing a "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, as cited in Block, 2007, p. 865). Many international students are placed in English as a Second Language courses in order to help them develop language-specific skills. But, I think it is important to consider who their community of practice is. Is it only other language learners? Only the instructor? Increased interactions with varied audiences can help students further develop language skills and build confidence. Therefore, I have also sought to widen my students' community of practice. My students have written reviews of local restaurants that were distributed to the next cohort of students in their programs. They have published blogs documenting their first-year experiences. Most recently, I have invited faculty and students from other university divisions to hear student presentations of narratives about indelible moments in their lives. Sharing their stories and ideas increases the international students' visibility on campus and provides insight into their experiences for others in the university environment.

When students are invisible in the classroom, they feel powerless. In my history class, I let the teacher define me—or rather, erase me—through his actions. It negated my responsibility and agency. It is essential for each person to develop their talents in order to be active participants. It is my hope that my classroom community provides students with self-confidence to pursue their goals, to make their voices heard, and to contribute to the global society.

Perspective

Currere has provided me the opportunity to demystify my relationship with my students, my devotion to community in the classroom, and my belief that everyone has something to learn as well as something to teach. Through looking inward, I understand how these beliefs can be traced to a critical moment in my high school education. My

journey, although significantly different from those of my students, resonates like the ripples from a stone thrown into a pond. The past influences the present in complicated ways, as does the future. Remembering my own educational experiences helps me to be the teacher I wanted or needed in my school years in the hopes that I can meet those needs for my students.

Yet, as I look around the college campus, I realize how great the distance is between my vision and the current situation. Although the presence of international students is obvious, they often remain unknown, seen only as a monolithic group rather than being truly included in the campus community. Their voices are largely absent from student government, campus publications, and far too many organizations. This is a disservice to everyone. I must continue to question and reflect. How do my practices promote agency? In what ways is the dominant culture reinforced? In what ways are content, context, and students connected? How can we move toward an environment where everyone contributes?

This pushes me toward culturally relevant pedagogy, viewing my students' differences as assets rather than deficits and building on their strengths, thereby, creating a more inclusive curriculum with them. Through such practices, I will seek academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The intersection of these three realms is the focal point at which students are not only seen but included. It is actionable and participatory. What this necessitates is moving international students out of their silos and integrating them in curriculum and community life. For international students who have chosen to attend school in the U.S., the community aspect is particularly important to their learning experiences as they often have goals to work in international businesses and engage with a global society. One's education cannot be confined to the classroom.

The presence of international students on campus is not enough to create the internationalization of knowledge, skills, values, or practices. This process is restless and dynamic. We must keep advocating for inclusionary practices through which all students become known, building community and contributing powerful voices to the global society.

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