

Curriculum as Encounter: Selves and Shelves

In this article, a veteran teacher expresses the importance of drawing on the life-texts of students and recognizing the ways that personal experience influences a student's perception of the world.

Half the curriculum walks in the room with the students, in the textbooks of their lives (Style, 1982).

A primary challenge for any classroom teacher is how to effectively tap into this resource, which I call the “scholarship in the selves,” in contrast to the traditional “scholarship on the shelves.” The priceless scholarship found inside students’ selves—their lived experiences and stories and their own methods for meaning-making—shows up free and automatically in our classrooms. Students never come to class without their life-texts. In a budget-conscious time, one might wonder why any teacher would neglect this half of the curriculum. But creating the pedagogical ways and means to engage the material embedded in student life-texts is not second nature for many teachers. Many of us were schooled to ignore our own life-texts, to focus solely on “objective” knowledge in becoming “educated.” Though in adulthood we may realize the importance of learning from life-texts, it can still be daunting to figure out ways to help the current generation of students honor both inner knowledge and outer knowledge.

In this article, I describe some of the challenges in surfacing students’ stories, followed by classroom strategies I have found during my more than 40 years of teaching to be especially useful for balancing the curriculum of selves and shelves, structuring for respectful encounter. I then look at how these methods may help teachers to address hot-button issues such as racism and learn to be better allies for all students. My thinking

as a long-time reflective practitioner has been influenced by the work of many others, my own practice, and earlier writing I have done. In this article, I want to acknowledge the validating impact I felt—early in my career—from reading the scholarship of Louise Rosenblatt, Paulo Freire, and Martin Buber.

A Challenge for Every Classroom

Academic knowledge needs to be seen in relation to the human experience already present in the classroom rather than as something apart from it. There is a huge mountain of inner stories already existing in any classroom, not just one large and virtually unassailable “objective” mountain of material to be learned. In fact, any physical mountain itself can be seen from many angles and measured in many differing scientific ways.

There is subject matter to be studied in any classroom but often traditional coverage of the “scholarship on the shelves” does not engage students or let them give voice to what they know. Teachers must—in inventive ways—also work with the “scholarship in the selves” to facilitate effective learning. To what degree any given teacher consciously and effectively orchestrates the interface—the Encounter—between designated material from the academic shelves with the life-knowledge inside the students depends on many factors. A key factor is to what degree teachers can frame and embrace the “discourse of potential” for their students and thereby orchestrate a respectful encounter.

Embracing the “Discourse of Potential”

I want to relate two stories that I heard from colleagues years ago that illustrate the powerful role that school teachers can have in framing how students balance selves and shelves. While I am an English teacher, the stories—on one level—are about teaching physics. As I recall, when one colleague took high school physics, her teacher began by stating that “Learning physics is like climbing Mount Everest; many attempt it but few can master it.” In contrast, another colleague’s high school physics teacher began by stating, “When you were a baby in your crib batting a ball around, you were doing physics, experimenting with momentum and inertia. In this class, you will learn names for things you have known all your life.”

The first teacher’s way of framing the task is rooted in what Linda Powell Pruitt calls the “discourse of deficit.” In that framing, subject matter on academic shelves is seen as huge and the student learner is minuscule, having little chance to engage meaningfully. This overpowering, one-sided approach to teaching academic content lacks balance and effectiveness.

The second teacher’s way of framing the task is rooted in what Pruitt calls the “discourse of potential,” acknowledging that the student is, in fact, already engaged with the subject matter by virtue of being alive. Living scholarship is embedded and embodied in the textbooks of students’ lives. The teaching task is to effectively orchestrate how the two types of scholarship, academic and personal—shelves and selves—complement each other. Lucille Clifton’s poem “study the masters,” featuring the *scholarly* life-text of an enslaved woman who irons for her master, is one of many literary texts that probes the positioning of selves and shelves and status. At any level of schooling, the creation of a learning community that can artistically hold the selves in the room as they encounter subject matter from the historical shelves of knowledge (or today’s headlines or happenings in their own lives) requires pedagogical strategies that can balance more than one type of knowledge, more than one perspective.

This article will now further discuss how teachers can manage the encounter between the curriculum found on the shelves and the curriculum housed in the selves, embracing the discourse

of potential. It will offer several classroom strategies for doing so and for balancing the multiple perspectives that such an approach brings to light.

The Name Quiz and Surfacing Students’ Stories

One way that I have tried to embrace this discourse and surface students’ stories is by giving a Name Quiz at the beginning of the school year. On the first day we meet, I seat students alphabetically in the outer and inner half-circles in my classroom. I give them a print packet of Name Stories, which include texts such as Sandra Cisneros’s “My Name” chapter from *The House on Mango Street* and Maria Mazziotti Gillan’s poem “Arturo.” In addition to reading from the “scholarship on the shelves,” their homework is to research how and why they each carry the name they do. I tell them I am a mom with two children, now grown, and I know that a baby is not born with a name tattooed on her or his forehead; somehow, a name gets chosen for each new human being. When I ask how many students already know their Name Stories, usually less than a third raise their hands. Often, only a few do. I ask my students to consider why it is that many of them have been walking around for 14 or so years with a name and do not yet know its story. I do not use a tone of shame, blame, or guilt but I am quietly serious, intending to rigorously raise their awareness: there’s a there there. Go find it.

On the second day of class, there is time for those who wish to share their name stories. And I am fortunate to add to the treasure chest of student name stories I have enjoyed learning across the years. Take Eddie’s, for example. He was ten when he and his Chinese American parents arrived in the United States. They said he could choose an American name but it had to be a picture to acknowledge the nature of his first language. He chose “eddy,” forever filling that name with watery illumination for me.

The second day of school I also give everyone a copy of the seating chart with all their names on it; this is their study guide. I take a photo of each student to supplement my own study guide because I need to be able to pass this quiz, too. And I have about a hundred faces and names to learn.

During the rest of our first week together, each class spends a few minutes each day preparing

for the quiz, led by students who volunteer to go around the room and say each classmate's first name aloud. I practice aloud, too. Once everyone knows everyone's name, I administer that first quiz—which is a blank seating chart awaiting the names of the curriculum-half that has just arrived. My students and I never fail to learn interesting material from that basic assessment. We come to see the wisdom of beginning our journey together by surfacing their Name Stories and by my modeling a way of “teaching to the test” that is customized and local, its own rigorous (and relational) standard.

Dialogue Poems to Balance Multiple Voices

As the year continues, unearthing multiple perspectives and types of knowledge, teachers must find ways to balance them all. One helpful method is to use dialogue poems, which give voice to more than one voice. These back-and-forth poems can be created by students of any age about any subject matter and specifics about how to do so are readily available via Google. When I assign the writing of them in my classroom, I offer published examples such as Paul Fleishman's “Honeybees” and Diane Burns's “Sure, You Can Ask Me a Personal Question” as well as dialogue poems written by previous students of mine if they have given me permission to do so, as Alex Gockel did about her 2006 poem printed below.

Why don't you look like your parents?

Adopted children don't.

Can you speak Chinese?

I'm not Chinese; I'm Korean; and no, I don't speak Chinese.

Do you miss your real parents?

I live with my real parents.

No, I mean your real mom and dad.

I never knew my biological parents.

Would you ever want to meet your real parents?

Biological.

Would you ever want to meet your biological parents?

My biological parents wanted me to have a better life.

What do you think it'd be like if you were still with them?

I'm happy where I am, with who I am.

While a dialogue poem can juxtapose multiple voices as Alex's poem does, it can also feature an internal

conversation, a meditation on something by oneself alone. Dialogue poems can be a powerful way to display or unpack Curriculum as Encounter. I will illustrate this further with a dialogue poem I wrote and the story behind it, as I shift gears in this reflective article to talking about some learning I have done related to my professional work with other teachers.

After I had been in the classroom for more than 30 years and working with other teachers as the codirector of the National S.E.E.D. (Seeking Educational Equity & Diversity) Project on Inclusive Curriculum (<http://www.nationalseedproject.org>) for more than a decade, I had a painful and illuminating encounter with a teabag. This teabag can be found in many American grocery stores. I first encountered the teabag, however, at lunch on the first day of a diversity training I was directing. An African American teacher was irate that this teabag was routinely displayed on the lunchroom shelf as just another beverage choice. I am a white teacher and I was clueless about why such an ordinary teabag would ignite such vehemence. How in the world, this African American teacher asked, could I be offering this tea at diversity training? The name of the tea was *Plantation Mint*.

As a language arts teacher, I have often differentiated between the denotative and connotative meanings of words—but this encounter provoked me to go beyond words to the fact that my white identity location in relation to the name of this tea was different from the black teacher's. In that lunch moment, her life-text and mine were not located in the same plane of experience. Friction—not warmth—was generated between us. Clearly, my understanding of the situation needed deepening. I turned to the strategy of writing a dialogue poem to study further both the selves (hers and mine) and the shelves (i.e., the “curriculum” found in public view on society's grocery shelves) in this inflammatory situation, which had caught me completely by surprise. Words in *bold* in the following poem are printed on individual *Plantation Mint* teabag packages made by the American company R.C. Bigelow, Inc. of Fairfield, Connecticut. The non-bold words are mine.

To Sip or Not To Sip: *Plantation Mint*

—my dialogue with a tea bag

Plantation—a big sprawling word—

with a history, very American

For three generations, the Bigelow family has specialized in creating a variety of deliciously different teas. In Plantation Mint, we use only the finest mountain-grown tea blended with natural spearmint. We hope you enjoy it.

What is planted
comes to harvest

by way of the hands of
plantation workers

Ingredients: black tea, spearmint

On the plantation porch,
who might sip

Plantation Mint

and who might not?

Please tear here

This is not a hands-off subject

Ask aloud
if allowed
to add hot water

Steep 1–2 minutes

Be careful: you could burn your hand
or your lip
if you thoughtlessly sip

fresh and flavorful
Plantation Mint

For now, this particular cup of tea will steep a bit; we'll return later to ponder it further.

An Old Fable and a Better Method: The Go-Round

Teachers can see the value of another helpful method for eliciting and responding to various texts (which I call the 7-ways) by recalling an old fable told about six blind men encountering an elephant. From distinct locations, each character grabs ahold of the large unknown (to him) object under study: touching knee, side, trunk, tusk, tail, and ear. When one of the characters walks smack into the elephant's side, he concludes, for example—in John Godfrey Saxe's narrative poem version—that the elephant "is very like a wall!" Individually, each character in this story reasons intelligently from sensory data in hand, linking phenomena under

study to something else in his experience. Two powerful ways of knowing, observation and prior experience, join forces to bring the unknown into view, to explain a new phenomenon. What results, however, is hugely inaccurate about the big picture. Alas, there are as many versions of the elephant as there are characters who erroneously conclude—in the isolation of their minds—that the elephant definitely and absolutely resembles a wall, a tree, a snake, a spear, a rope, or a fan.

Unfortunately, these men seem to know no other way to encounter one another's ideas than to stubbornly debate the matter of who is absolutely right. Clearly, this ancient parable is a case of non-dialogue. What the characters have in common is intellectual blindness, held in place by their belief in their own hands-on (but partial) version of something, seeing it as being the only and superior truth. And not one of them listens with a commitment to grasp or try to understand anyone else's data or location. What they each possess is an "educated" provincial arrogance; what they lack is a conversational (educational) structure that insists on a balance of listening and speaking, a taking of turns—which could further inform both their individual and collective learning. They need practice at playing, what Peter Elbow calls, the Believing Game as a corrective to the domination of the Doubting Game. The capacity to encounter the unknown, something bigger than any one person can grasp alone (including the societal systems of racism or sexism or heterosexism—in which both selves and shelves are situated) is limited by a individualistic approach to reality and by the habit of shouting others down. As I reflect on my own schooling experience as a high school debater who learned to "kill" people with words, I question the degree to which American schooling still inculcates shouting others down as a "winning" pathway to knowledge. And I wonder to what degree the current, often non-productive practice of national politics is a product of that schooling habit. There must be a better way.

As students of mine from across the years know well, what the folks in the fable could benefit from is a simple and profound Go-Round. It works this way. To capitalize on the various knowledge locations present in any classroom and various

types of cognition as well, one pedagogical device I designed has students pause—after encountering a big elephant, a tiny teabag, or any size text—and write a 7-way response of 250 words. Often this writing is done as homework.

In doing so, each student documents her or his knowledge of the situation by being specific, using the following seven prompts and briefly explaining answer choices reflective of their varied locations and angles of interpretation: (1) a **FACT** that I know about the text in front of me is; (2) an **EMOTION** that I feel about this text is; (3) something similar that I've experienced or read that I can **LINK** to this text is; (4) an **OPINION** I have about this text is; (5) thinking imaginatively, I ask **WHAT IF** some element of the text were changed in the following way—or what if I myself were a character in the drama, who might I be; (6) what clarification or motivation **QUESTION** do I have about this situation; and (7) last but not least, what specific **APPRECIATION** can I express about this particular text or situation?

As a teacher, I have found that the cognitive range of these seven prompts invites students to spread the wings of their minds widely when encountering any subject matter or text even as they are asked to be concrete and candid about their own particular perceptions and then to listen to comprehend how others are perceiving the material at hand.

In a conversational Go-Round, which follows their time of writing documentation about their individual encounter, each student publicly states one of his or her responses, until all seven prompts are covered. The Go-Round continues around the room with students, one by one, offering additional responses from their individual locations until everyone's voice has contributed to a quilt of voices, responding from various angles to the subject being studied. The collective public data in the room can then serve as foundational fabric for inclusive cross-talk about the big picture of any number of texts or "elephants" in the room.

Structuring classroom interaction to capitalize on the many ways of seeing that are actually present in the room makes common and superb sense. Classroom Go-Rounds are one pedagogical and democratic way to balance the "scholarship on the shelves" with the "scholarship in the selves," so

as to stitch both types of scholarship into an inclusive curriculum quilt. Go-Rounds are vital for Curriculum as Encounter.

Using Selves and Shelves to Address Hot-Button Issues

At the beginning of this article, I wondered why any teacher would neglect to acknowledge and make use of the obvious life-texts that show up in the people present in any classroom. My encounter with tea too hot to sip offers a potent clue about why silence sometimes cloaks or chokes the textbooks of the lives of students—and teachers, too. Unless a capacity for dealing fluently with hot-button differences exists, teachers will often avoid life-text material that has the potential to burn not only the threads of collaborative quilt-making underway but to send an entire classroom quilt up in flames.

If the truth be told, one choice many white teachers in American schools still make is to "simply" not talk about race much, if at all, finding the subject too hot to handle, though race continues to exist inside the scholarship of any and all selves in any and all classrooms in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. And there also exists voluminous scholarship on the academic shelves about the subject matter of race in America, where phenomena such as micro-aggression and stereotype threat, for example, are explained in detail. So, I ask—related to Curriculum as Encounter and balancing attention to selves and shelves—how do we deal with the teaching gap between what is known about the subject matter of race and the capacity of ordinary well-meaning white classroom teachers to actually talk about (our) race in relation to the subject?

One strategy I use is to bring a birdcage into view. I have found it can help illuminate something essential about the racial dimension of selves and shelves. In her 1983 book *The Politics of Reality*, scholar Marilyn Frye uses the metaphor of a birdcage to illustrate how a systemic oppression such

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as racism works. Her visual image can help people start to see, for example, how a tea named *Plantation Mint* can function as a wire in a birdcage, as one wire in a network of wires, historical and current. A person caged by the stereotype threat of a loaded historical term like *plantation* is not exactly free to simply ignore its micro-aggression. It is one of many micro-aggressions experienced, one of the wires that forms a cage of oppression.

The realities of race and other identity locations must be understood on a systems level, as a network of en-caging wires to see “the politics of location,” to use scholar Adrienne Rich’s term, which come into play among everyone and their histories in any classroom. Astute teaching about identity locations (plural) is essential for furthering the growth and achievement of all students as democratic citizens. Understanding the systemic nature of plural identity locations and how variously various aspects intersect in the lives of any and all students and teachers (i.e., the phenomena of intersectionality) is equally important but fleshing that out further is the subject for another article. I choose in this article to focus primarily on racial location because the voices of white teachers who understand and effectively teach about this terrain are much needed.

Marilyn Frye’s birdcage metaphor provides a way to grasp at a glance how differently located a free-flying being (not subjected to stereotype threat or micro-aggressions) is from one en-caged and to see the (white or male or straight) privilege of flying free, being “normal.” Because American democracy is still a work-in-progress, it is critical that we teach directly about ongoing efforts to dismantle, wire by wire, historically oppressive “birdcages” such as racism, which still imprison aspects of student and teacher identity in both inner and outer ways. As students examine literature and speak about the stories they carry, bringing the scholarship of themselves into the classroom—their speaking out can help to dismantle the birdcages found in their inner worlds (internalized oppression) as well as birdcages that operate in the world around them.

Nurturing Allies

The classroom oblivion of free-flying “birds”—whose politics of location, through no fault of their

own, can mean that they have never known or noticed the “invisible” cages in which some other “birds” exist—can be transformed into citizenship agency, once students are taught to see systemically. What free-flyers do not know and do not even know they don’t know (what Pruitt calls DKDK) can come into view not only by being introduced to Frye’s birdcage metaphor but by being awakened at the same time to everyone’s capacity for being an ally. This capacity is a potent latent power, which all free-flyers possess but of which they are often unaware. So it sits in the classroom, un-tapped.

Historical examples of ally power, documented in scholarship on the shelves, demonstrate how identities not caged can choose to use their uncaged location, their “privileged” politics of location, to peck away and bend or break a birdcage wire here or there. When students are taught to see the existence of systemic oblivion and oppression in society alongside the concept of ally power, another generation of American citizens becomes equipped to actualize democracy’s further development. And this caliber of teaching is not about shame, blame, or guilt. It is about the opportunity, responsibility, and joy of awakening the citizenship agency that teachers and students can choose to use with the “free-flyer” aspects of our identities.

To cite one historical example: When Branch Rickey, the white (free-flying) manager of the 1947 Brooklyn Dodgers, saw how the birdcage of racism imprisoned certain “colored” birds and the American game of baseball itself, he hired black Jackie Robinson, using his ally power to open the door of the cage. His courageous ally action made the Land of the Free closer to what it aspires to be. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt’s allying with singer Marian Anderson is another.

Fortunately, there is ample scholarship on the shelves about the powerful ally concept with plenty of historical examples of folks who have taken on the role of ally. But if we do not tap into it, silence reigns, depriving young Americans of historical knowledge they’re entitled to, perpetuating an ignorance of systemic realities unworthy of democratic education. The current generation of students is not the first to have the opportunity to contribute to the process of erasing the evil stain of various oppressions from the fabric of American life. Other “free-flyers” before now have done courageous ally

work. More of that inclusive historical truth needs to be taught so that the young can gain inspirational knowledge from ally role models whose stories and methods are documented on library shelves and on the Internet, too, for that matter. Students who are members of at least one targeted group benefit from such shelf-knowledge as well, from their own complex and plural identity locations.

Teachers as Allies for Deepening Student Awareness of Selves and Shelves

The American philosopher William James once said that “The greatest revolution . . . is the discovery that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspect of their lives.” Good classroom teaching involves not only supporting students’ increased access to outer knowledge but also must create ways for their inner knowledge to surface and, indeed, to change as their human growth and development is fostered—as the textbooks of their lives keep on adding chapters, informed by balanced conversation with other selves and by rigorous attention to scholarship on the shelves, old and new.

In the real estate business, there is a well-known mantra insisting on the importance of location, location, location. Location awareness is also pivotal—across the curriculum—for democratic citizenship education. Specifically, the public forum of the classroom stage must be created as much from the students’ inner knowledge and plural identity locations as it is by the outer knowledge of subject matter, classic and contemporary. Designing democratic pedagogical strategies that generate and validate the site-specific educational wealth that becomes evident during Curriculum as Encounter—in any type of classroom, public or private—is one of the powerful ways that teachers of all racial hues can take on the ally role. We can use our adult power to support and empower the young in their process of learning the wisdom of going public with the inner scholarship of themselves and balancing it with outer scholarship on the shelves. And in this fashion, each generation takes its turn, stitching its patches of knowledge into the quilt of human truths.

Years ago, I pictured Curriculum as Encounter, the stitching together of inner and outer sources of knowledge, as the making of a classroom com-

munity quilt. In 1986, I described my philosophy of education in a poem titled “The Quilting Challenge: For Every Classroom.” I offer it here with abundant respect for the vital role that classroom teachers can and do play every day in stitching democracy further into being. 

It works this way
students bring their own cloth patches
teachers provide needles and thread

then learn so-and-so’s name
as part of the art
of classroom quilting

Watch as they practice
their stitch in time

fashioning their pieces
creating their own covering

unraveling threads
often re-stitching

in a curriculum which needles them
but also beckons their involvement
with its production of warmth

For the rank-and-file
this is no ordinary production line
rather a sewing circle
gathering regularly
across time

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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Similar to the article, the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan "Investigating Names to Explore Personal History and Cultural Traditions" invites students to investigate the meanings and origins of their names to establish their personal histories and explore the cultural significance of naming traditions. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/investigating-names-explore-personal-878.html>