

WHERE'S THE LOVE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING?

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Vexation: *Where is the love in teaching and learning?*

I miss teaching middle school. As a middle school teacher, I knew just how to love my students. The right combination of humor, fun, hugs, safety, and deep engagement in learning seemed to come intuitively. While I made mistakes, my students were forgiving of me, and I was forgiving of them. As a Latina, Biology major, and successful college graduate, teaching Black and Latino/a children, I felt comfortable in my skin, confident in my knowledge of science, and hopeful with respect to student learning. Since entering the university classroom as a teacher educator, I have been grappling with the question, “Where is the love?” How can I prepare prospective teachers to attend to what I believe is a fundamental component of social justice teaching and learning when many of the structures that shape college classrooms interfere with establishing loving relationships? Although I inevitably fall in love with each of my students, (and for me, it is the moment when I become cognizant of their hopes and dreams and begin to direct my activity to further their dreams), I find myself trying to hide how much I care.

I teach at a college that expects excellence in teaching, and as a teacher educator, I set the bar much higher, because I must model for my students the types of pedagogy that they should engage in. Yet, traditional structures, such as seminars that meet for only two hours a week over fourteen weeks, student competitiveness, my role as evaluator, the sheer amount of material I feel we need to cover, all mitigate against establishing collaborative, fun, and loving learning environments. There is also a culture that worries about “grade inflation” and accepts that some students should receive C’s, D’s and F’s, a culture at odds with my sense that failing grades indicate I am not doing my best as a teacher. While I am convinced that a more engaged pedagogy will narrow achievement gaps and transform the very nature of teaching and learning, I am also beset by fears. Most of my students are comfortable with traditional student-professor relationships, what if I make them feel uncomfortable? How might close relationships interfere with holding students accountable for their professionalism and scholarship? What role might my ethnicity and gender play in how students respect and respond to my philosophy of teaching? How will students perceive their intellectual and emotional engagement in a class that privileges emotions, not just ideas? How do I even have time to develop and sustain such relationships if I hope to get tenure?

Venture: *How might love transform my college pedagogy?*

I believe a teacher who places love at the center of pedagogy attends to at least four elements: identity, self-efficacy, motivation, and classroom tone. I will elaborate on each element drawing on the case of a middle school student, Ruth, who participated in an afterschool science program and use her case to pose questions for my teacher education pedagogy.

I define identity as a personal process of individuation—one’s self-image, self-esteem, and self-memory system—and a social process of taking on roles or membership in groups. Both processes are mediated by the social context, which specifies the rules for behavior, tasks, and resources that are available to enact our identities. In the classroom, identity is both who we are and who we are becoming. Costa (1995) developed a series of categories including potential scientists, other smart kids, I don’t know kids, outsiders, and inside outsiders. Importantly, she stressed the ways potential scientists, students for whom the world of family and friends was consistent with the world of science, would have smooth transitions into science, while students who were outsiders would not. As a sixth-grade student in a bilingual class, Ruth did not see herself as a scientist, she claimed she did not “really like observing things, and asking things, and making hypotheses.” She also said she would not want to become a scientist. Her goal was to become a lawyer, like her aunt. According to Costa, Ruth might fall into the category of “other smart kids,” because the world of family and friends was consistent with doing well in school, but not with science. For Ruth to achieve in science, I needed to get to know Ruth and her positionality with respect to science and ease Ruth’s transitions into the world of science. In the afterschool program, students posed questions and designed experiments to answer those questions. In reflecting on the program Ruth said, “Probably we were acting like scientists at that time.” How can I attend to my current students’ identities, as they are becoming teachers? For some of my students, the worlds of family and friends might be very consistent with the world of social justice teaching developed in our program, but for others it is more of a struggle. How might my students be able to look back and say, “Probably we were acting like social justice teachers at that time.”

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How can I help ease my students' transitions into social justice teaching in ways that are respectful of, and responsive to, their identities?

Self-efficacy refers to one's perceived capabilities for learning or performing specific activities at designated levels and is also related to the outcome expectancy of completing a task, or the beliefs about consequences or rewards of action. While students with high self-efficacy tend to demonstrate confident, appropriate action and high cognitive engagement, students with low self-efficacy may exhibit resignation, apathy, withdrawal, self-blame, or depression. When I asked Ruth about the level of support she received during the program, and whether it was adequate, she said, "When you came, you told us what we needed help in, and the rest we could do by ourselves."

How can I attend to my current students' sense of efficacy and build their appreciation for what they can do by themselves and where they might need help? How can I foster the idea that teaching competence or ability is a changeable, controllable aspect of their development as social justice teachers?

Motivation refers to the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained. Ruth and the other members of her group wanted to know what happens when yeast and pond water are mixed. Ruth recognized that in her regular science class, she would not have been able to answer this question because they focused on more general ideas, not details. She also said, "I liked observing the things and seeing how they moved, and seeing things I've never thought of looking at before." Her question instigated her interest and the newness of her observations sustained her interest, even through the difficulties of drawing what she saw.

How can I attend to my current students' motivation to learn about social justice teaching? How can I foster opportunities for their questions to drive their inquiry into teaching and learning?

Classroom tone is a dynamic variable that may range from positive feelings of enjoyment, hope, curiosity, satisfaction, pride, empathy, and love to negative feelings of boredom, anxiety, hopelessness, apathy, anger, shame, jealousy, and hate. A positive classroom tone tends to support deeper engagement, more elaborate processing strategies, generative and creative thinking, increased intrinsic motivation, mutual focus, and solidarity. On the other hand, a negative tone increases cognitive load, and individuals are less willing to make mistakes, and show decreased intrinsic motivation and mutual focus. Ruth described how one of her teachers created a negative classroom tone, saying, "She was always focusing on instead of the good things you do, the bad things you do. And instead of focusing on the excellent work that you do she just like came out with the negative things."

How can I build a collaborative community of reflective teachers who respond to the challenges of teaching in urban schools with creative and generative thinking, mutual focus, and solidarity?

I do not want to make it seem like all love is lost in my classroom. I have slowly but surely been making strides to align how I teach with my philosophy of teaching and how I hope my students will teach. However, this has been a subversive project, mostly hidden, and gradually revealed, so that they get it by the fourteenth week. At the beginning of the semester, students write a teaching autobiography. This assignment helps me get to know my students and begin to understand what motivates them to teach. Rubrics, detailed assignment descriptions, classroom practice, and opportunities to submit drafts help students develop a clear sense of what my expectations are and what they have to do to be successful. I also work to establish a learning community, where small group structures foster friendships and collaboration, position students as teachers and learners, and allow me to engage in frequent dialogues with students. Finally, across the semester I draw on stories from my teaching experience, including triumphs and failures to help students see the ways teaching is an individual/collective journey embedded in the constraints and possibilities of the teaching context. These are some of the ways I attend to issues of identity, motivation, self-efficacy, and classroom tone. Yet, I have now set a new goal for myself. I want to begin on day one with the premise that love is the heart of teaching and learning. So I am filled with many questions and seek to share strategies and discuss the pros and cons of gradual versus radical love in teaching and learning for social justice. In doing so, I draw on the wisdom of bell hooks (1994, p. 21), who wrote, "Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks."