

Seeking common ground: making connections big and small

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Abstract

Purpose – This essay furthers cross-cultural exchange, and understanding. Written for a general audience by a teacher educator, it argues for accepting all others into the academic conversation. Using varied examples, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate both lifelong learning and the power of connecting across difference.

Design/methodology/approach – The author draws upon experience as a teacher and professor and his engagement with Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) for examples of edification and engagement.

Findings – The author cites both the current period and a mid-twentieth-century American major event, the civil rights March on Washington to illustrate possibilities for connection, clarity and symbiosis.

Originality/value – Written for this journal, this essay uses an original and skeletal theoretical and empirical frame as well as field examples to argue for inclusiveness, exchange and acceptance of all learners.

Keywords Education, Culture in education, Diversity and social justice policies in education

Paper type Conceptual paper

So any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible – and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people – must be prepared to “go for broke”. Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. —James Baldwin, *A Talk to Teachers*[1]

Written in 2017, this essay reflects a time during which the common ground of public education in the USA is shifting in ways both unnerving and representational: unnerving for the deregulation of policies and norms set to help all students, and representational for the reality of the current social and political climate. Said simply, it is a challenging time to be in school, to explain a new normal to students. The epigraph above addresses a similar challenge. While the determined resistance to which Baldwin (1963) refers may present differently in the early twenty-first century than it did in the mid-twentieth century, commonalities of intolerance, xenophobia and racism perniciously persist.

Still, every year, many thousands of teachers return to their classrooms, university lecture halls and other settings dedicated to edifying and preparing students to succeed in life. What can complicate this charge is the diversity of life itself. For all of life’s infinite



beauty and challenges, to find common ground demands that educators account to the best of their abilities for this diversity. Such demand is intensified in the field of teacher education, within which many students graduate to teach others to teach all students in public schools. For those students with economic hardship or for whom English is not their native language, the need to account for access and equity may be exacerbated.

In 2017 such accounting must include attention to explicit humanity and the affirmation of the dignity of all learners. Toward these ends, this essay has three intentions. The first intention is to affirm to a broad audience the exigent need to treat all in the human conversation with kindness, respect and dignity. In reality, that does not happen for too many millions of students of all ages, in all countries, but that does not discount the imperative. Which is to say, to teach is to believe in possibilities of success for all students and to be a teacher is to be a pragmatic optimist.

The second intention for this essay is to argue that the very purpose of formal education – I argue from a US perspective – includes a sense of spongy inclusion. To teach is to be a sponge for connecting the world, albeit through small pores and droplets of accrued wisdom. Teachers at all levels can help connect for students the dynamic diversity of the world in which we live.

The third intention of this essay, written for a Saudi Arabian and international journal by an American educator and lifelong New Yorker, is to make the Prince Sultan University Research Review (PSURR) road while walking it and to contribute some soil to the common ground of exchange and academic collaboration. To write an essay for a new academic journal outside of one's field challenges the writer to be his best scribe. A pedagogue who invites exchange around issues both existential and pedantic risks alienating the audience, but also presents an opportunity for pedagogical dialogue and reflection. Such is the nature of education – the very generation, exchange and dissonance of ideas helps learners grow. This essay will present these three intentions and conclude with implications for future work and exchange.

The goals of this essay, and of the PSURR emergence, include provocative deliberation, and the tropes of kindness, inclusion and appreciation will be threaded throughout the essay to meet these goals.

First intention: kindness, respect and dignity for all as tending the garden

I have over the course of a 30-year career boiled my teaching philosophy down to a pithy encomium: be kind and respect all. I offer this neither as a salve nor a strategy, but a baseline for a common ground. Students cannot learn well if these conditions are not met. From that place of kindness and respect, ideas can flourish and the human drive to contribute can be welcomed and nurtured; absent it, the soil for ideas is more barren and less fertile. Pedagogues need to model how to incorporate all voices, perhaps especially those we find challenging.

For example, some years ago, I interviewed psychologist Richard Nisbett at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City. After a discussion where we unpacked the history of IQ testing and the limits therein, it was time for questions and answers from the audience. One of the first commentators was a mature woman with fire engine red hair. Here is a snippet from our exchange:

Audience member: Thank you for taking my question. I work with pregnant teenagers at an alternative high school, and (emphasis mine) *I'm so sick of you professors with your fancy words telling us how it should be; I'm telling you how it is. How does this talk help my students?*

Nisbett: (To me) You want to take this one?

With many years' experience with marginalized populations, I resonated with her frustration at listening to others hypothesize. I am aware of the gravitational pull to reality and even the resentment of others who position themselves superordinate to those who choose to teach public school students. The pedagogue's tools for rhetoric, for theory and even for understanding or accepting the ineffable will never undermine the deterministic, utilitarian and increasingly quantified demands for accountability in higher education, teacher education, P-12 classroom teaching and other fields.

Yet, teachers are deeply involved and can gain insight before academic pedagogues. For students coping with polluted water, air and/or neighborhood violence, their needs are more immediate than a qualitative study – researched, analyzed, peer-reviewed and published often years later – can meet. In fact, common sense dictates the difficulty to study with distracting untreated medical, dental or even social issues (Keiser, 2013). For teachers on the front lines of teaching, without a university office in which to hide, academic detachment can be challenging to accept. Commiseration may be a powerful force, but what teachers, let alone professors, commiserate about pales in comparison to what many of the students may face.

Teacher educators are thus dually positioned – as stewards of teaching and of preparing the next generation to do so, and as representatives of academic privilege. In both positions, teacher educators can tend the pedagogical garden with kindness and respect for all.

Second intention: connecting worlds big and small as irrigating the ground

American society is pluralist; American citizens are ineluctably diverse. We vary in temperament, talent, and capacity within all groups and categories, including those of sex and race. We locate ourselves in the world in the light of experiences we built up over time. We interpret the realities we confront through perspectives made up of particular ranges of interests, occupations, commitments, and desires. (Greene, 1978, p. 126)

Greene's (1978) proposition that Americans "locate" and "interpret" individual experiences and realities is essential to the development of a thoughtful citizenry. It is this ability to "locate" oneself and "interpret" personal experience against the larger, more variegated fabric of society that will determine whether we ever, in fact, achieve the democratic and socially just republic once envisioned. The preparation and education of a compassionate and socially just population remains one of the irreducible challenges of schooling in the USA. Leading among unrealized goals in the USA include those explicated by Dr Martin Luther King in his "I Have a Dream Speech". Although Dr King gave countless speeches, his 1963 jewel, written for The March on Washington for Economic Jobs and Justice in Washington DC. The event is notable for its message of inclusion, and is remembered, in large part, as for Dr Martin Luther King, Jr and his "I Have a Dream Speech"[2].

While I have regularly assigned that speech and other readings by Dr King in my university classes, it is a footnote to the speech that I offer here as an example of connecting worlds. For it was the improvisation of Dr King that birthed the speech, not the one he held in his pocket. Apparently, the last written version of the speech did not include the dream metaphor. But:

As King neared the end, he came to a sentence that wasn't quite right [. . .]. Nearby, off to one side, Mahalia Jackson shouted: "Tell them about the dream, Martin!" King looked over the crowd. As he later explained in an interview, "all of a sudden this thing come to me that I have used – I'd used many times before, that thing about 'I have a dream'" – and I just felt that I wanted to use it here. (Hansen, 2013)

This historical footnote may not matter to most, especially if not charged caring for "minds and hearts", but for teachers caring for "minds and hearts", although the impact of the given speech is indeed what was notable, the nuance matters. In the same way that Rosa Parks is

remembered as a hero for her stance against segregation, rather than the thousands that followed her bus boycott, Dr King is remembered for the “I have a dream”, litany, not the gospel muse that pushed him to use it. Such history may be of greater interest to the writer, who named his second daughter Mahalia, but it nonetheless represents the connectivity espoused by this second intention. The backstories matter.

During the writing of this essay, the writer attended an orientation for his students to do fieldwork in a Newark, NJ high school. The administrator who addressed us implored the students to “be sponges for knowledge and culture. Share what you know and who you are”. His point was that to begin teaching, with all its work and concomitant stress, new teachers need to both know themselves well, and to use everything at their disposal to best reach and teach all students. It is the role of teachers, and the teachers who teach them, to make connections and show the interconnectedness of human life and culture. Teacher educators teach pedagogical content, but also model lifelong learning and re-learning. Preservice teaching students who can make connections that underscore our common humanity may be more likely to accept all learners as they look for connections not divisions.

Third intention: InShallah growing and fertilizing the collaborative ground

The third intention of this essay is to further the mission and aims of the journal itself, the PSURR. In the current world political and social climate which seems to present both divisions and conflicts as normal, collaborations across differences, cultures and time zones can make a difference. Thus, the inclusion of this essay in this journal and my participation in the Prince Sultan University College for Women’s First Conference on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in 2011, bespeak one diverse engagement, with contours worth retelling.

As with many Westerners, my first visit to KSA was mysterious and ingratiating; mysterious for the trip delays, the visa process and even the surprise at the invitation, and ingratiating for the warmth, the generosity and the germination of ideas. But nothing unnerved me like my return to my home country and local airport. After a long flight from Jeddah and the concomitant combination of jetlag and culture shock, I went through Passport Control at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, at which time I was interrogated. It went something like this:

Agent (after examining the full page KSA visa in my passport): So you were in Saudi Arabia?

DK: Yes, officer.

Agent: Why?

DK: To attend and present at an academic conference.

Agent (skeptically): Oh yeah? What conference?

DK: Prince Sultan University College for Women’s First Conference on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

Agent: Oh yeah? What did you present on?

DK: Well it’s complicated, but basically I talked about the need for compassion in the classroom.

Agent: (in a louder tone) WHY?

I include this exchange as an outlier – my trip to the Kingdom was universally warm and pleasant. My academic contribution then as now includes attention to the affective domain; said another way, how one teaches may be as important as what and to whom one teaches. And teachers, as well as professors, need validation for their work. The fact is that the only pushback, the only questioning I received was upon my return; but talking about contemplative pedagogy, compassion and even mindfulness seemed to be well-received by the audience and translator reception to it. Perhaps the passport agent was frustrated, perhaps he was unduly harsh, but the reaction underscores the need for this work, beginning, in this case with my presence at the conference as well as my inclusion here. To be clear, questioning and critique are welcome stations in Academia, but they resonate more when following some acknowledgment of effort. The writer’s stance on inclusiveness and encouragement translates to other settings as well.

The academic’s tools for understanding or accepting the ineffable will never undermine the deterministic, utilitarian and increasingly quantified demands for accountability in higher education, teacher education, teaching, nursing and other fields. But we need not lose our humane vision for all learners. We can be technical and transcendent at the same time.

I think teaching teachers is a bit like this: teachers are deeply involved and can gain practical insight before academic pedagogues do. A friend once referred to academia as the codification of common sense. For students in the urban classroom coping with leaded water, their needs are more immediate than a qualitative study – researched, analyzed, peer-reviewed and published often years later – can meet. In fact, common sense dictates the difficulty to study with distracting untreated medical, dental or even social issues (Keiser, 2013). For teachers on the front lines of education, without a university office in which to work, academic detachment can be challenging to accept. Commiseration may be a powerful force, but what teachers, let alone professors, commiserate about pales in comparison to what their students face.

It is through collaborations such as this one that we can deal with commiseration; it is through the very engagement with the other that minds open and stay so. I started this section with a retelling of a situation where one’s mind (passport agent) was not open to appreciating the distance traveled and the cultural work on all sides needed for the success of the conference, and indeed this journal collaboration. In Spanish, the expression “venceremos”, translates to “we will be victorious”. In English, collaboration necessitates we listen to, write with, and learn from diverse learners and teachers. InShallah.

Conclusions and implications for our futures

This essay ends as it began, with a charge to make connections across difference. Using the tropes of kindness, inclusion and appreciation, it argues for a kinder, more collaborative world, and offers that collaborations such as the PSURR are exemplars of possibilities. Within the writer’s academic field of teacher education, opportunities abound to make connections and to steel the next generation for provincialism and ignorance. Every moment is an opportunity to respect and be kind, but kindness is not enough – students of all ages need to feel part of the human conversation. Visiting KSA and staying connected fosters this sense of inclusion, and the writer hopes, with this small contribution, that the appreciation of such inclusion is represented herein. The writer uses variegated examples to illustrate the power, purpose and availability of lifelong learning. Using a famous American event, the 1963 March on Washington as well as field examples, he argues for acceptance, and edification particularly within the pedagogy of teacher education.

Notes

1. The Saturday Review, December 21, 1963.
2. Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, "I Have a Dream", August 28, 1963, Speech transcribed from a recording. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Palo Alto: Stanford University.

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