

Fostering a Critical Conscious— a Wide Awakeness—in New Teachers through Student Teaching Abroad

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“To educate is simply to form,” Freire (1998, 39) tells us. Who forms and who is being formed? And how do we prepare ethical, critically conscious educators who will, as Freire envisions, respect their students as whole human beings? How do we foster a critical consciousness in new teachers, teachers who themselves are part of a culture that is embedded with inequity and oppressive systems, schools being one of the most important systems to maintain and normalize social injustice. “Teachers are not simply curriculum dispensers, but rather are cultural workers committed to addressing the contextual issues facing our students, our schools, and our communities” (Kincheloe, et al., 2000, p. 5). To become cultural workers, a critical consciousness—a wide awakeness—is required. This article examines the fostering of critical consciousness in new teachers through student teaching abroad.

The 21st Century School Context

Paulo Freire’s idea of conscientization, the raising of a critical consciousness in educators, remains one of the major challenges for those who prepare teachers for our nation’s public schools during this era of technocratic, mechanistic testing, which is supported by *No Child Left Behind* legislation. Yet, this legislation is not unexpected for “how can one expect a government that makes its elitism and authoritarianism manifest . . . in its politics [to be a proponent of] the autonomy of schools” (Freire, 1998b, p. 10)?

The freedom that teachers once had to develop, design and teach curriculum has decreased and is now being replaced with prepackaged, one-size-fits-all, and scripted materials for the teacher. “Their autonomy and the autonomy of their schools are restrained from producing what the prepackaged practice promises: children who enjoy freedom, who are critical and creative” (Freire, 1998b, p. 9). Recent events have forecast what the future may be like for new teachers.

Teachers who try to teach through challenging questions and active engagement are struggling at times with being reprimanded or even fired. In an article on the parental support for a teacher who was dismissed for not using scripted instruction, David Cutler describes the principal’s charge that the teacher did not “teach the curriculum.” Cutler goes on to quote the teacher, stating that he was fired for his teaching approach as he was following the district curriculum but “[i]nstead of direct teaching...he divides his students into groups, each dedicated to a different academic subject, [creating a] ‘learning center’ method [that] allows students to help each other, learn by themselves, and progress at their own pace, all under his guidance or assisted by parent volunteers” (*Boston Globe*, February 9, 2006). The conflation of curriculum with instruction reduces teaching to a mechanical activity, increasingly constricting the decision making and curriculum making of a teacher. Freire argued that for any reason “to transform the experience of education into a matter of simple technique is to impoverish what is fundamentally human in this experience: namely, its capacity to form the human person” (Freire 1998). What opportunities are there for teacher-candidates to see otherwise when they do fieldwork in classrooms, especially those who use direct or scripted or prepackaged instruction and materials? And how can teachers become cultural workers if they are critically unaware of their own culture?

Cultural Identity of a Teacher

An identity emerges out of one’s cultural upbringing. That identity we carry with us throughout our living and relating to others. For a teacher, identity motivates and colors the social dynamics of teaching, as well as the pedagogical approaches used to teach. If a teacher does not reflect on the impact of culture upon his or her identity, the ramifications for students are immense. Freire argues that a teacher’s cultural identity is the engine that moves whatever happens in the classroom (Freire, 1998). If a teacher is critical in the Freirean sense, that is, has a depth of awareness of herself as in reciprocal relation to her students, an awareness of connection and justice, then the teacher will work towards the well being and critical consciousness of her students—on their behalf, not hers. Their

work together in the classroom will raise their consciousness of their place in the world, of themselves as actors and agents, rather than as passive recipients (Freire, 1998, p. 108). To teach in the Freirean sense of critical educational practice is to question, to challenge, to become aware of possibilities in life, not to accept the status quo. As Freire states,

critical educational practice is to make possible the conditions in which the learners, in their interaction with one another and with their teachers, engage in the experience of assuming themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons; dreamers of possible utopias, capable of being angry because of a capacity to love. (Freire, 1998, p. 45)

For Freire, the aim of educational practice is to foster a sense of efficacy and action in students, rather than place them in the position of being the object of a teacher's work. The students are the center of learning—and learning leads to action in their self-interest. Contrast this with the traditional paradigm of teacher-centered classroom, where the teacher practices a banking method of teaching, where students are repositories for teacher content, a classroom where students must answer other people's questions (Freire, 1970, p. 71).

To shift this traditional paradigm and move into critical educational practice requires of a teacher a willingness to be part of her student's learning, where learning is dialogical and reciprocal, active on each person's part. The teacher in this situation has authority, but this is used to set conditions of learning that engage students in understanding themselves and others, in identifying issues that impact their lives, in naming that which inhibits their educative, social, and creative growth as persons and dreamers. The teacher must be predisposed to turn towards her students as co-workers as well as guide them in their learning to name their world (Freire, 1998, p. 102).

To move into this Freirean paradigm, a teacher needs to be aware of her differences with her students as well as her connections with them. Both, teacher and students are subjects; students are not objects, as in the banking method, but subjects who act upon their world. Subjectivity, the human interaction between people, must be predicated upon respect: respect for the agency of the student, and a teacher's respect for herself as critical practitioner. She cannot view her role as a teacher to impose or to control her students. Rather, she must work with and along side them, listening to their questions and constructing the learning of topics around those questions. And one can only listen to another if it is grounded in respect for that person. Respect changes all relationships, and is, according to Freire, fundamental to being a critical practitioner.

“[T]he first step toward this respect is the recognition of our identity, the recognition of what we are in the practical activity in which we engage” (Freire, 1998b, p. 71). Through respect, students grow into their own agency, their own self-assumption of who they are and how they might influence their conditions. When a teacher enters a new classroom in a new cultural environment and school, a singular opportunity to become or enhance a critical practitioner stance is given. Sometimes teacher-candidates have been prepared in a program that ignores the socio-political context of education, where the technical approach is privileged with no questioning as to the teacher’s authority to know what and how to teach. Such unexamined assumptions wreak havoc upon the new teacher who happens to be placed in a classroom with students of different ethnic, linguistic, cultural backgrounds. Unless the teacher is predisposed to question herself, to see her students as subjects and to desire to work with them rather than impose upon them, the classroom cannot become a transformative space where learning and engagement can thrive. Freire warns us that “[p]urely pragmatic training, with its implicit or openly expressed elitist authoritarianism, is incomparable with the learning and practice of becoming a ‘subject’” (Freire, 1998, p. 46).

Overseas Student Teaching Program

Ohio University is an active member of the Consortium for Overseas Student Teaching (COST), an association that places education students in schools in foreign countries to fulfill student teaching requirements. Since 1973, the COST Program has collaboratively arranged student teaching experiences at receiving COST institutions in fifteen countries to develop the skills and dispositions associated with teaching, but in international settings. Prospective teachers who apply to COST become engaged in potentially transformative experiences by working in a school in another country under the mentorship of a classroom cooperating teacher and a COST university supervisor.

The COST Program provides opportunities for new teachers to become critical, to assume their subjectivity within classrooms through encountering new cultures and learning to navigate as part of that culture. In COST, we do not presume to think that critical practice and consciousness occurs on its own simply by exposing a new teacher to a new cultural environment. Rather, consistent guidance and exposure to new ideas and skills sets are the conditions provided so that a new teacher can question her identity without resistance and fighting for control of the situation. The key is to cultivate an appreciation for difference and to help the new teacher situate herself as a subject, unfinished

and changing, willing to learn new ways of seeing not only teaching, but the world as well. Respect for differences must be made explicit and specific as a disposition to be fostered prior to going abroad and then during the student teaching experience overseas.

Respect is one of those values that manifest itself in a classroom in its own language and attitude. For example, when a COST teacher stops and listens to a student's ideas and responds to those ideas seriously, students can see how she respects who they are as people. A COST teacher, moreover, who participates in afterschool activities with her students, who coaches or teaches, or attends student club or team events, places herself in the position of acknowledging her students outside of the classroom. Thereby, she demonstrates her respect for them. Relationship building is the glue of respect, and for teachers it is accessible. All a teacher has to do is show up, and students take note.

COST students are drawn into the life and activity of school, in part, because their life is centered around school and teaching—at least at the start of their experience. Encountering students in extracurricular activities shifts the perspective of COST teachers to see their students as people with complex interests and lives. Stories about families are exchanged, views on sports events are on-going conversations, and meeting family members who attend a competition increases the experience of the COST teacher to better understand the students in the classroom. A COST teacher in Guadalajara, Mexico, for example, was an outstanding chess player. He joined the school chess club, and soon discovered that a third grader and the school custodian were excellent chess players, quite advanced. Not only did this tournament reveal unexpected talent, but his obvious enjoyment of playing chess allowed others to see him in a different way, too. “Sometimes a simple, almost insignificant gesture on the part of a teacher can have a profound formative effect on the life of a student” (Freire, 1998, p. 46).

We encourage COST students to actively participate in all areas of school life for this reason, namely students having a “profound formative effect.” The COST student is a stranger in a strange land; and her students are only too willing to guide her into their culture. This extracurricular interaction weaves a web that is carried into the classroom and in teaching. Respect emerges in significant forms as the COST teacher gets to see students in new surroundings, demonstrating their prowess in sports or games or drama. Recognition of students' talent—or oftentimes simply their efforts—is enough to provide incentive for learning and increased participation in academic endeavors. While most experienced teachers know this and attempt to attend student events after school, the new teacher frequently is unaware of the kind of understanding gained by participating in these important socializing activities. The act of partici-

pating, of recognizing a student from class who is playing soccer or chess, for instance, enhances education into what it should be—an experience of the whole person, rather than a solely academic task.

COST teachers see everything about a school as “new” or “different” even as they describe what is common to most schools: teachers, classrooms, clubs, students and their behaviors. In another culture and country, even the familiar is made unfamiliar, providing an invaluable opportunity for the new teacher to really see, to become consciously aware of the physical, the social, and the academic manifestations of the life of a school.

Freire also notes that the hidden curriculum of school life should draw our attention. Hence, he writes, “What is important in teaching is not the mechanical repetition of this or that but a comprehension of the value of sentiments, emotions, and desires” (Freire, 1998, p. 48). Critical educational practice is linked to a teacher’s capacity to see students as exciting, complete, vivid human beings, who have skills, knowledge, and understandings about themselves and the world. A teacher who can tap into students’ prior knowledge and skills can foster their curiosity about new ways of thinking, different ways of being through their teaching. What a powerful pedagogical lesson this is for a new teacher, coming to glimpse the world through the eyes of her students and to recognize how much they know and can teach her about their world, their country, their culture. This awareness is all the more memorable and acute because the COST student is in a new culture where she is pushed to suspend her cultural as well as her educational paradigms.

Teacher as Cultural Worker

For Freire, the concept of cultural identity is a “dynamic relationship between what we inherit and what we acquire” (Freire, 1998, p. 46). When COST students travel abroad, they are stretched to interact with all manner of differences as they navigate airports, ground transportation, and find their ways to their school community. While it is common for the overseas COST supervisor to meet the COST student when he or she lands, with the first breath of air in the new country, the COST student rapidly must adjust to light and sound, geography and road systems. The accents, signage, building organization, and so forth urge the COST student to keep alert. In fact, this is a necessary disposition to being a teacher in the classroom, to see and to sense the nuances of change and differences that young people bring into the classroom each day. If a teacher is to be responsive and respectful to her students, she must be always “wide awake,” alert to subtle shifts in mood or behavior in them. “It is in experiencing the differences that we discover ourselves

as I's and you's" (Freire, 1998b, p. 71). The experience of awareness of oneself and one's culture can foster a more critical way of looking at schools, at students, and at what it means to teach.

Sometimes what we acquire ideologically from our socio-cultural upbringing challenges the COST student (and all of us, really) when we travel abroad and live in another culture. Each time we relate to another, we interpret from our cultural foundation, and this can sometimes be tension filled. While we may be conditioned by our culture, we are, however, not predetermined by it (Freire, 1998b, p. 71). We can reason our way through the cultural tension. The "wide awakeness" assists in this process because the sense of cultural balance has shifted within the COST student to allow openness to consider another point of view. When a person is within one's dominant culture, rejecting differences and thinking (subconsciously) that one's culture is better than another becomes the normative way of looking at the world. Living abroad shakes a normative view so the COST students become aware of their monocultural attitude. In a wonderful irony, the COST students' attempts to understand another culture frequently awakens their awareness of their own culture and beliefs. And out of this emerges an appreciation for the culture and the foundation of understanding it.

These pathways of understanding guide the COST teacher towards a new openness that increases with each experience. Over the weeks of student teaching abroad, the COST student begins to "feel" at home in the new culture, and the texture of the reflections they write reveal this disposition. The COST teacher as cultural worker, that is, one who can live in multiple cultures, navigates with acceptance through the new channels of cultural perspectives. It is in the experiencing of difference that we experience who we are (Freire, 1998b, p. 71). And in our awareness comes knowing; and with knowing, growth.

Many COST students who have chosen to student teach abroad and have returned to the United States come back as teachers who are cultural workers. They have lived in another culture, as a different cultural being, and learned to be part of their new culture while at the same time becoming aware of their own culture. They return enhanced. For some, they are transformed in their vision of themselves as educators. Walking into their own classrooms in the United States, they bring with them a "wide awakeness" that allows them to see and respond to their students. While they share their experiences abroad with their students, COST teachers also have a confidence about themselves that distinguishes them from other first year teachers. This confidence has been earned by living in and among different cultural beings, and working to understand themselves in relation to those who at first are deemed different.

Freire states that teachers are always engaged in ethical decision making, whether or not they take responsibility for it (Freire, 1998, p. 87). COST teachers are awakened to this responsibility because they can never assume their students understand what they are asking if it is predicated upon some cultural norm. The taken-for-grantedness teachers can bring into their teaching simply dissolves quickly the first time a COST teacher mistakenly does this in the overseas classroom. Learning, then, becomes explicitly connected to teaching, echoing Freire when he writes, “I cannot be a teacher without exposing who I am. Without revealing, either reluctantly or with simplicity, the way I relate to the world” (Freire, 1998, p. 87). Extending this, the COST teacher cannot escape who she is as a person and as a teacher. Each decision regarding curriculum and each action regarding classroom behavior and expectations mirror brightly to the COST teacher her assumptions—and she must adapt and think. This is the wide awakesness that illuminates critical consciousness. And the classroom becomes the new world, where possibility for creation, for freedom, for renewal takes root in the teacher.

One COST teacher wrote me to share how each year he sees his students as a new culture to be discovered, to learn as much as to teach. He takes nothing for granted, he says, which tends to annoy his colleagues, but reaps invaluable results in the relationships with his students and their academic progress under his guidance. While he brings in stories and artifacts to share with his students, he also teaches them about our U.S. society. He builds on his stories to help his students become “wide awake” as well to their social consciousness, especially around issues of race and class. This teacher’s enlarged vision and understanding of others he attributes directly to his experiences overseas.

Such teachers are, at their best, cultural workers who model to their students year after year what it means to be awake to the world, beginning with the world in their classroom. Respect is constituted through relations between the teacher, the student, and the curriculum in a space that honors critical thinking and questioning. A teacher who herself is a learner, who is humble and knows she does not know, remains awake. She understands that “[a]s a teacher I cannot help the students to overcome their ignorance if I am not engaged permanently in trying to overcome my own” (Freire, 1998, p. 89). And, in closing, one question is asked: Don’t our nation’s children deserve a teacher who has been moved to risk, to experience the discontinuity of being immersed in a new culture, and to model the freedom to be a citizen of the world?

References

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