Stopping the Persistence of Memory:

Creating Cultural Inclusivity in the Classroom

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Abstract

Supporting student cultural literacy is increasingly at the forefront of educational dialogues. Using diverse instructional strategies, stories, and instructional methodologies can empower students to express understanding through non-traditional means that may create more meaningful, diverse-supportive learning experiences for all students.

**Cultural Hegemony in the Classroom**

Civil unrest has highlighted an underlying issue that many have been aware of for as long as public school has existed: “equal” schooling does not necessarily mean equal representation in a classroom curriculum. Because schools in the United States tend to be framed upon Eurocentric ideologies (Abela & Dague, 2020), the many voices and experiences that create the fabric of what the United States are not always recognized or shared. However, the United States is a tossed salad with various the flavors of Native, European, African, Asian, Immigrant, and Other voices. The inclusion of all voices is not only necessary to reflect our population, it is essential in order to provide an accurate vision of the country we live in.

For years teachers have reached into historic fiction and other novelizations in an attempt to create a multi-cultural classroom environment. Unfortunately, that led to more “novelization” in that student conversations about multicultural experiences existed only in the context of those specialized lessons. Perhaps extending that practice in favor of a formative, continual multi-cultural dialogue that continues in the normal pulse of campus celebrations and dialogues could further support multi-cultural education in American public schools. After all, students do not exist within the confines of the demographic boxes they check on a survey, students exist in a web of intersectionality that includes social, political, and economic considerations that indicate where their identity truly exists. That complex web of identity and agency is where our instructional practice should hover as well and in order to accomplish that, the voices of many need to be shared both as members of a group and as snapshots of a unique life experience.

Many students are forced to acclimate to the culture of the socio-political space that a school is a part of. For those students that may include becoming a part of the colonial mindset that threads through much of their schooling not only in courses like history (Graveline, 2000) but also in ELA classes and even science and mathematics and even in the holidays that are celebrated, or not acknowledged.

By creating classrooms where students either acclimate to the colonial mindset or they do not, teachers force students to make a choice between being included (Brayboy, 2014) or ostracizing themselves in the face of a subjective truth and that includes self-selecting to be a part of the “correct” understanding or interpretation of a phenomena or to choose to not accept a standard. By asking questions about the colonial framework in which they exist, students are putting themselves in danger. By not encouraging different cultural narratives, students who do not embrace colonial mindsets may feel silenced.

Furthermore, students with limited exposure to voices outside a traditionalist mindset that are constricted to a singular, colonial curriculum are also in danger and may experience blunders once they are in a setting where they interact with players for the outside world. For example, students with limited exposure to history can limit themselves in the future such as not knowing what the Holocaust was (Westover, 2018, p. 157). Students in such debacles do not know what they do not know, one such student concluded after years of study, “the history most people agreed upon was not the history I had been taught,” (Westover, 2018, p. 238). The plight of that student should not be taken lightly as it serves as an indicator for students from similar backgrounds that may not have had exposure to multiculturalism in an educational setting. Those students, too, are in danger as they reach maturation in our increasingly global society and are not prepared to interact with those who have a different culture than their own.

In becoming educated about the collective past from multiple perspectives, the student can become liberated (Freire, 1974) from their lack of multicultural awareness and from the dominate colonial mindset present in many Western schools (Blackstock, 2010). It is therefore the duty of public-school teachers to help expose students to a collective past by including voices, stories, and cultures to enrich student understandings of their own communities.

**Including Multiple Perspectives**

One natural way to include other voices in mainstream instruction is through Social Studies coursework, namely history and particularly through the practice of story-telling either in a primary or secondary context. Still, keeping cultural conversations limited to a content-based conversation structure can be stifling, especially because multiple cultures constantly surround students during their day in the form of story-telling, traditional attires that may be worn by fellow students, and religious practices. Primary sources and story-telling practices have a place in all classrooms but that should not be the end of where students hear and experience other voices, stories, and holiday practices that exist both within and outside of a Eurocentric framework.

Sharing cultural stories with students is a critical practice for educators of all students. “Knowing who they are in history increases the probability that students will develop a deeper sense of purpose for their lives; it gives their existence in the world greater meaning when they know about those who struggled so they could have the opportunities that they now have” (Kafele, 2013, p. 115)-that goes for all students but especially those from traditionally marginalized populations. Sharing, learning, understanding, and cooperating can be better achieved in school communities by providing multiple stories from multiple perspectives and giving each voice agency and celebration every time that a story is shared in an educational setting.

After all, stories were once regarded with the same truth that we give science in today’s world (Howard, 1991) and stories are powerful tools that can reinforce an ideal (Briody, Pester, & Trotter, 2012) or create a cautionary tale depending on the context, the content and the reward in the story. Stories were, at one time, the sole means in which we had to educate, the same could be argued of the holidays that are widely accepted and celebrated by a culture. Story-telling in and of itself is an important component of the folk culture that helps individuals connect with their roots and their cultural surroundings. Supporting folk culture as a means of self-discovery and cultural ownership (Bruner, 1990) can provide students with a necessary component to both their social and emotional development and well-being.

**Using Diverse Instructional Frameworks**

In order to create a necessary shift in the habits of mind that are unnecessarily created by developing and maintaining the colonialist mindset that many schools currently exist inside of, schools should continue to include that perspective as a cultural norm while supporting the development and exploration of other perspectives.

One way to support the development of colonial alternatives in the classroom would be through exploring and implementing pedagogies based on research supported methodologies that support best practices for instructing outlier groups. For example: there are four frameworks that construct an Indigenous experience: imperialism, history, writing and theory (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) and those components create a structural pedagogy that supports Indigenous-based pedagogies. The Afrocentric education model includes: identity, PanAfricanism, African/African American culture, African values adoption and transmission, Black nationalism, community control/institution building, and education as opposed to schooling (Shockley, & Cleveland, 2011). Both of these non-colonial based models of instruction are heavily influenced by story-telling, holiday recognition and other celebrations, and the idea of community building through team-work and active tribalism.

**Use Multiple Perspectives to Create Unity**

*Folk stories.* To create unity, we must acknowledge and celebrate differences. One way of achieving that goal is to actively seek out cultural expressions that share authentic perspectives from multiple angles. Discuss each voice as an authentic part of the fabric that makes up that culture and find ways to mark similarities and differences that are found therein. For example, stories of practicing resilience through motivation in times of need abound in cultures around the world including in the Starfish story (Richardson, 2011) as well as in the Hummingbird story (KTN News Kenya, 2011). Those stories are found in different regions of the globe and in different contexts, but both tell the story of an individual overcoming great adversity in order to do what they can to help their community, or a community of “others”. By acknowledging and celebrating this commonality, teachers can continue developing multi-cultural literacy and awareness as well as cross-cultural unity with their students.

*Multi-media.* Story-telling is not left to the realm of a racial/cultural norm, the importance of story-telling is what created pop culture. For example, comic books are a form of story-telling, which have been used in a directly informative way not only to entertain but also to instruct. Researchers in Romania attempted to create comics in French to motivate students to want to learn French in order to read the comics, comics are stories that children relate to-this treatment worked (Popa, & Tarabuzan, 2015). By extrapolating this practice into American classrooms, teachers can look for cultural stories that are written in a comic book style to help generate culturally based dialogues which could in turn develop not only cultural awareness but also empathy. Some examples of texts that demonstrate this “pop culture” and cross-cultural motif include “New Kid” and “Persepolis”.

Television shows and movies are another form of story-telling in today’s world. Use that medium of story-telling to actively seek examples of unity and cooperation in the media that can reinforce unity and cooperation in your classroom and in turn, in your community. Story-telling can build bridges (Howard, 2017) and create positive sense of community between and within student populations (Stewart, 2020). Think of ways to point the attention of your students toward television shows that normalize cross-cultural unity and cooperation include but are not limited to: Loud House, Mixed-ish, Goldbergs, Fresh off the Boat, Saved By the Bell Reboot, and Big City Greens. Along with demonstrating cooperation and community between and among cultural groups, these shows also demonstrate different holiday celebrations, folk stories, and diverse voices which can help students become more culturally literate.

**Conclusion**

Sharing multiple perspectives of the same story of our collective history is an essential component to supporting cooperation between and among communities. Doing so presents every player in the story of history with an equally important, equally relevant and perceptible voice thereby empowering students who receive such instruction to be more aware of the collectivist culture that frames today’s society.

By allowing all students to hear different voices we are practicing a form of multicultural instruction. The students are given a collection of voices and perspectives and background knowledge about an event and then they construct what they feel happened from an informed, dual-perspective acknowledging that there is a shared, unknown truth and that their exploration of those multiple perspectives through their own lens can help them better understand the phenomena in question.

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