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My Best Learning Experience

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 According to Pinar & Grumet, we each have a “biographic situation” where we are “located in a historical time and cultural place” (1976 cited in Pinar 2004 p.g. 36). We bring this with us when we teach. It is important for students of curriculum to understand how one’s academic studies and life “are imbricated in society, politics, and culture” (Bruner 1996 cited in Pinar 2004 p.g 36) Through his method of Currere, Pinar (1975), created a “strategy for students of curriculum to study the relation between academic knowledge and life history in the interest of self-understanding and social reconstruction”. By writing and reflecting upon key points in our educational journey, such as our best learning experience, we can examine how this past experience has influenced our worldview.

 I would like to tell the story of my favorite teacher, Mr. Hayter. I think of him as the person who taught me about empathy and how to be a critical thinker. After deeper reflection, I realized how his teachings influenced my political views. Consequently, I found myself wondering about the social and political context of the class he taught. What was the cultural context of the time and how did this contribute to the informal curriculum of his class. How did this cultural context shape my connection with the subject I was learning about? Finally, what can I learn from Mr. Hayter’s teaching, that I would like to take forth into my own teaching?

 I grew up in a small town called Rawmarsh, in South Yorkshire, England. Rawmarsh is a working class town where many people worked in the steel and coal industry. My granddad was a coal miner and my dad worked in the Steel Mill. At the time, students graduated from Primary school at 12 years old and attended Secondary school until age 16. I went to Rawmarsh Comprehensive School, where Mr Hayter taught, from 1988 to 1993. Students attended mixed ability classes for the first year, during which time they were assessed on our performance. Students were “streamed” into classes based on their performance on these assessments. I was placed in the “top” sets for all subjects. I cringe when I think about this now, as I wonder what impact this had on the equality of the education every student received. Mr Hayter taught Modern European and American History from 1900 onwards. Some of the subjects on the curriculum were the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis and the assassination of President of the USA, John F. Kennedy.

 I liked Mr. Hayter’s class because he made history interesting. I thought he was funny and cool. Foremost, I remember how Mr. Hayter made me feel. *Respected, valued, engaged and safe* are descriptions that come to mind*.* When I began to write about my learning experience, I noticed how I often referred to the collective “We” rather than “I”.I think this is because it was my impression other students in the class may have felt the same way about him as I did. We respected him because it felt like he respected us. It was as if he understood respect was something to be earned, not assumed, and this applied to teachers too. What I liked about him most was his sense of humor. He was sarcastic but he used it appropriately, most of the time. He would sometimes swear and talk to us like we were adults. He didn’t sweat the small stuff. I felt like I could say what I really thought in his class.

 I tried to be an obedient and hard working student and was bullied by other students because of this. They called me “a square” and “ a swat”. Now, when I think back, I realize I did not get bullied by my classmates in Mr. Hayter’s class. Perhaps, he kept all the students so engaged, they didn’t have time to think about doing anything else. Even the students who usually got into trouble, listened to him. We knew he wasn’t a pushover and we knew how far we could push his limits. He was what I would call *firm but fair*. This certainly explains why I felt safe.

 In my opinion, the work Mr. Hayter asked me to do was at the right level; easy enough for me to understand but hard enough to stretch me. This kept me engaged and challenged me to think about things more than I had before. He taught me that we don’t all see the world in the same way and because of this, it was reasonable to question authority. I now know he was teaching me to think critically. He helped me to understand that our history influences and informs our worldview. He showed us we how we can predict what will happen in the future, if we know what happened in the past. I still remember and use the questions he taught me to ask: Who? What? When? Where? How? And Why? I remember how he used the example of a piece of propaganda from World War One; Who made it? What is it? When and where was it made? How was it made? Why was it made?

 The work we did in Mr. Hayter’s class didn’t feel like we were doing schoolwork. I want to call it *Surrepticious learning*. We thought we were having fun until we realized we had actually learned something! How did he do that?! I wonder if he did this by using a medium that engaged us and we could relate to. In the 1980’s and early 1990’s that medium was *Television*. When we studied World War 1, we watched the television series of Blackadder Goes Forth. The fourth and final series was written by Richard Curtis and Ben Elton and was broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation in the fall of 1989. Blackadder is a white, male, comedic fictional character, placed in the context of different eras of British history. The program has the same cast of actors who assume similar roles in each series. Blackadder Goes Forth, set in 1917, is about British soldiers in France, waiting in the trenches before going into battle with the German army. The main character, Blackadder is a war veteran who “sees the futility in the war and displays his lack of confidence in the army commanders” (“How accurate is “Blackadder Goes Forth”?” 2014). Private S. Baldrick is his sidekick who devises a plan in each episode to escape going into battle. Indeed, Baldrick’s tag line is “I have a cunning plan”. Baldrick is depicted as Blackadder’s inferior servant, as Blackadder frequently makes disparaging comments about his class and intelligence. Blackadder initially makes fun of Baldrick’s plans but then often tries them out in desperation. For example, in the final episode, Goodbyee (Curtis, Elton and Boden, 1989) Blackadder pretends to be insane, in the hope he will be discharged. He does this by placing underpants on his head, pencils up his nose and repeatedly saying nonsense words such as “wubble”.

 Initially, the class was impressed that we were allowed to watch television in class, not to mention a program that had adult content and swearing. Then as we watched more episodes, we began to care about the characters and what happened to them. The characters made jokes about the lack of supplies and the ineptitude of those making decisions. In the final episode, we watched the characters climb over the top of the trench, into no-man’s land. As the characters ran toward the camera in slow motion, we watched them fall to the ground, hit by the machine gun fire and mortar bombs. The music and film were slowed down and eventually superimposed with another image; a field of poppies. I remember how the laughter stopped, then the classroom became hushed and quiet. We were suddenly hit by the realization that this television program, although full of extreme stereotypes, was based on reality. There were real men who sat in the trenches and waited to walk into the machine gun fire. There were many Baldricks and Blackadders, some of them our ancestors. I doubt reading a history textbook would have had the same impact on our learning or encouraged us to question what was written about this period of history in those textbooks.

 Our empathy for Baldrick and Blackadder, made our later field trips to battlefields and war memorials in Belgium and Northern France more poignant. The historical site at Vimy Ridge was the first time I conceptualized Canada as a country. We were told that one tree was planted for every Canadian soldier that died. I stood looking at a forest of trees and got a lump in my throat. I remember thinking Canada sounds like a nice country, if that is how they honor their people*.* Thinking about it now is the first time I have made the connection between those classes and moving to Canada.

 In a later interview, Rowan Atkinson (Roberts 2012, October 9), the comedic actor who plays Blackadder said “Of all the periods we covered this was the most historically accurate” He goes on to say “We may have exaggerated the characters and what happened to them, but it is very difficult to exaggerate the absurdity and horror of the First World War”.

 Mr. Hayter’s approach to teaching history was very different to the approach that requires students to memorize facts and dates to be recalled in a test. There has been concern recently that students learn what they need to know on a test rather than understand what they are learning. Eisner (2001) states “history is not about how many questions you can answer but what questions you can ask” (p.g) Mr. Hayter engaged us in activities that elicited questions and discussion. One of the skills that have been lost in education is “quality of conversation” (Eisner 2001 p.g). Teachers need to provide more opportunities for students to engage in “challenging kinds of conversation”. Eisner also points out the importance of teaching students how to ask questions and consider multiple perspectives. In Eisner’s opinion, asking questions is not an automatic process that happens through maturation but rather it is a skill that needs to be taught. Without teaching students this skill, their intellectual ability is undeveloped. I still use the questions Mr Hayter taught me and apply them to any situation..

 Barbezat & Bush (2014) state “While fostering their knowledge base and analytical abilities, we want to present material in a way that supports students in having their own agency so that the material is not simply a set of intellectual hoops for them to jump through but an active opportunity for them to find meaning and develop intellectually. “ (Barbezat & Bush 2014 pg 3). One of ways we can assess whether education is fulfilling its role is to consider whether students are engaged in what they are doing? Are they gaining satisfaction from the process? (Eisner, 2001). Mr. Hayter used ways of teaching that engaged us as a group. Certainly, I did the work because I enjoyed learning in his class. When I read Eisner’s (2001) article where he endorsed promotion of “improvisation, surprise and diversity of outcome” as virtues of education, I thought of how Mr. Hayter taught us.

 bell hooks (2010) described a similar teaching strategy called “engaged pedagogy” (p.g 7). It’s purpose is to restore students’ “will to think” when they have been taught the purpose of education is for them to conform and be obedient. She discussed the importance of teaching in a way that “enables students to think critically”. According to Daniel Willingham, critical thinking is “seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms young ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth” (cited in hooks 2010 p.g 7). According to hooks (2010) critical thinking involves weighing up the evidence from multiple points of view and recognizing that we can’t all be right. It is understanding that knowledge is constantly changing shape and is not static. Certainly, Mr.Hayter’s history lessons emphasized the importance of understanding how social and historical context changes knowledge. I still find myself asking “what is this doing for the person” when analyzing information.

 One of the greatest lessons Mr. Hayter taught me was about empathy. I agree with hooks (2010) that we are all responsible for the learning environment. Mr. Hayter encouraged us to work together respectfully. He created a sense of community through the field trips. He used the medium of television to help us visualize and connect with the characters, so that we were better able to empathize with them. This could be considered what Nussbaum called “narrative imagination” where one can imagine place oneself in the shoes of another (1997 cited in Bai, Cohen & Scott 2013).

 A goal of contemplative education is to provide opportunities for students to “engage with materials that they recognize and apply its relevance to their own lives, to feel deeply and experience themselves within their education” (Barbezat & Bush 2014 p.g 3). As I wrote about my best teaching experience, I began to wonder how the social and historical context of the time influenced my learning. It occurred to me that we might have empathized with characters such as Baldrick and Blackadder, because we could relate their situation to our own. In many ways the discontent the men in the trenches expressed about higher powers that governed them, may have reflected the sentiments of people in the town where we lived. The Miners Strike between 1984 and 1985, was a major industrial action to protest against the shut down of the British Coal Industry by the government under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The South Yorkshire region was heavily in favor of the strike. Near my hometown, there were clashes between the striking miners and police, viewed as representatives of the state. For example, on June 18th 1984, 5000 miners clashed with police on the picket line at the Orgreave coking plant near my hometown. Violence broke out when the police charged the crowd on horseback and used truncheons to subdue the crowd. 51 miners and 72 police were injured. This became known as the Battle of Orgreave. I remember my parents buying extra groceries to give to families whose fathers were on strike. I did not understand what was happening but I sensed the opinions of the adults around me, that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the government did not care about these families or their suffering. Many people lost their jobs following the strike. In 1983, Britain had 174 working collieries, in 2009 there were 6. Many boys in my class would say things like “what’s the point in going to school, if there are no jobs”.

Interestingly, while writing this reflection, there was a request for an independent public inquiry into the police management of the Battle of Orgreave, because of the continued impact on the lives of those involved even today. The request was denied.

 On reflection of this learning experience, the informal curriculum of Mr Hayter’s class is clearer to me. Did he intend to draw parallels between soldiers about to go into battle and students in a working class town and their shared confusion and mistrust of governance? I don’t know. What I do know is that he taught me to take time to learn about views that are different from my own, to question what I am told and to not be afraid to stand up for what I believe in.

 I recently found an article where Michael Gove, the Conservative Secretary of State for Education in Britain between 2010 and 2014, criticized the use of Blackadder Goes Forth to teach World War One history. He stated it “denigrates patriotism and courage by depicting the war as a “misbegotten shambles” and that “only undergraduate cynics would say the soldiers were foolish to fight.” (Perry 2014, January 3)

Mr. Gove, I disagree.

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