

## **Critically Reflecting on the Discourses that Guide Our Thinking, Speaking, and Actions: Developing a New Literacy**

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As a teacher and teacher educator, I believe that all children deserve teachers who are knowledgeable about students' social, cultural, and racial/ethnic backgrounds, and who understand and respect families' beliefs, values, and practices. Unfortunately, such awareness is lacking for far too many students in U. S. schools because teachers tend not to reflect these dimensions of their identities, or may not acknowledge how schools privilege those students who are most reflective of institutional expectations and rules. This seems critically important as without such knowledge and understandings, teachers may not embody nor demonstrate empathy for students' everyday dilemmas that impede their schooling and achievement.

For me, a key question that echoes and resonates about this all too common reality is: What are you doing to alter existing circumstances, and what should others do as well? I have been giving this question a great deal of thought as the teacher of a course for undergraduates (many of whom will become teachers) at a large, research-oriented university that is primarily populated by White students from small communities and suburbs in the Midwestern state where it is located.

I see my university students as embodying identities that Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain (1998) say are "formed and re-forming in relation to historically specific contexts" (p. 284), and "on intimate landscapes through time" (p. 285). Such dimensions of our identities always are responding to the intersections of social, political, and cultural discourses in various contexts. Yet, through struggling with these intersections, each of us develops an identity. When students come to campus, they bring what Russian linguist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) called authoritative discourses that are shot through with words of power or "authority"—those of a religious group, government, political party, and/or a community. When other people's values are juxtaposed against those of our own, we develop what he termed internally persuasive

discourses, or those that become “half ours and half someone else’s” (p. 346) and we try these on for their utility at any one time. Nussbaum (1997, 2001, 2011) calls this sorting out of viewpoints an exercise of the “narrative imagination,” as it enables consideration of what it is like to be located in someone else’s circumstances and to understand what they are thinking and feeling. Sometimes, individuals replace prior ways of understanding with these new ideas, and maintain them for long periods, and others are discarded after trying them out for a time.

In the course I teach, I offer multiple pathways for students to consider alternative notions to those ideas they bring to class. For example, I offer readings of fiction and non-fiction books and scholarly articles, film viewings, guest lectures, interactive dialogues, and volunteer service to enable students to wrestle with nested concepts concerning race, ethnicity, language background, gender, ability, social class, and gender identity, to name a few. The explicit goal is to challenge students’ existing authoritative discourses and offer alternative ways to think about, talk about, and act with regard for these notions. It is not a matter of replacing one set of authoritative discourses with another, but to locate these in dialogue with discourses students currently consider prominent and influential for them.

Conducting volunteer service also enables students to develop relationships with people different from themselves and grow in their ability to understand other persons’ viewpoints. Serving regularly over the semester in diversely populated school and community organization after-school programs, and activities such as adaptive fitness at a university gymnasium and pool allow students to imagine others’ dilemmas and understand strategies for resolving these. Such experiences serve to enhance and elaborate the reading, lectures, and presentations, as well as questions and conversations among one another. I caution students that although clinics where children receive services for speech, hearing, or other services seem like propitious locations to volunteer, that these may not be locations to conduct their service for this particular course. Families that tend intermittently to access the latter clinic services diminish opportunities for ongoing interaction with the same children. For similar reasons, I encourage university students not to volunteer at a local children’s museum or historical society exhibits where families come once a semester or only occasionally as these may privilege families with funds to pay entrance fees or to bring their children at times when some parents

remain at work or school themselves.

Where and when students volunteer is important for the experiences to yield opportunities to develop relationships with a diverse array of children over time and across occasions. Also, it is valuable for students to debate with one another what they are observing and understanding from their interactions with youth and their teachers. Often, these experiences become central to the course as students take into account other information they are learning in light of their immersion in volunteering. So, these require careful choice in location and persons served.

Dewey (1938) and Ladson-Billings (2001) caution that such experiences can be both miseducative and helpful for enhancing and elaborating students' thinking. As Ladson-Billings points out, serving people who differ from us can inform as well as reinforce stereotypes and misinformation individuals hold. It is important for university students to acquire accurate information from knowledgeable people about those with whom they work. These discussions provide crucial opportunities for students to reflect on how their impressions and understandings about people change over time. I have learned that adequate time needs to be allotted to these conversations to truly make an impact. Adequate time is not readily apparent and depends by semester on the group of students enrolled. I have found that only offering one or two occasions for such carefully facilitated conversations is not enough.

The course and students' accompanying experiences in service to others are designed to contribute to students' repertoire of engagements with different people. One of its potential pitfalls, as Hallman and Burdick (2015) have pointed out, is "reshaping practice while engaged in practice" (p. 139)—a complicated endeavor. That is, students often are expected to conduct themselves with kindness, humility, and empathy while learning in unfamiliar contexts in what may seem an uneven trajectory. It becomes critical, then, that their teacher and volunteer coordinators and mentors provide gentle guidance as they sometimes stumble in efforts to be the best tutor or learning coach they possibly can be.

I have found that the course and students' accompanying experiences in service to others may yield significant understandings for them. At times, they may alter the ways they have talked, thought about, or behaved with

people who differ from themselves. At other times, they initiate reconsideration of authoritative discourses guiding their ideas and actions. This seems like a worthy endeavor to me.



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