Centering the Periphery: Giving Students' Voice and Choice

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In April 2019, I carried out an action research study with a class of High Ability Primary 6 students to understand how to better engage students in a Social Studies class through discussion of controversial issues. Based upon my observations, these students demonstrated behaviors that showed they were disengaged during the monthly lesson on current affairs known as News Sharing. During News Sharing class, students were typically given an adapted news article chosen by me with a set of questions that tested mainly their comprehension of the article, the relevance of the article to National Education (NE) messages and how they might contribute to society based on the issue featured in the article. I felt that the formulaic nature of the lesson defeated the aim of News Sharing which was initially introduced with the purpose of improving students' general knowledge about the world and Singapore. The lesson eventually resulted in an English language comprehension class where discussion was minimal and almost perfunctory.

I was quite dissatisfied with the state of affairs as it ran counter to my vision of what a Social Studies class should be and my transformative role as a Social Studies teacher. I felt as if I was oppressing my students, viewing them simply as empty receptacles waiting to be filled up by content. It was an untenable situation. Upon further probing, these students shared that they would like for the lesson to be changed, especially on the topics that were discussed as well as the approach. They expressed the desire to discuss topics that were of interest to them instead of those chosen by the teacher. Among the topics that they suggested were meritocracy, issues on foreign talents, gender inequalities as well as academic demands. I took their suggestions to heart and began to search for a better approach to discuss these topics. I also decided to frame the issues in a way where they could be controversial in nature and thus invite livelier discussion. Furthermore, this was an area that I felt merited further investigation since findings from this action research would have implications for other Social Studies teachers who might be interested to find out how they could introduce controversial issues as a way to engage their primary school students.

From the very start, the decision to use discussion as a pedagogical approach was strategic. Available literature as well as my own observations suggested that conventional instruction that is very teacher-directed would not be as useful in this case. I, therefore, adopted a structured discussion approach in introducing controversial issues to the class of 40 students in a three-period lesson. I leaned heavily to the works of Hand and Levinson (2012) who identify discussion as fulfilling three main criteria: firstly, the articulation of multiple viewpoints; secondly, discussants being receptive to other opinions besides their own; and finally, there is a seriousness to the endeavor as the discussants are desirous to get to the truth of the matter.

Besides the change in approach, my role in this lesson was also different. Naturally, I had my own views of the issues discussed. Heeding, Cowan and Maitles (2016) who argue that teachers' views should not impede classroom discussion if teachers are honest and confident enough to allow their students to challenge them, I made these views about discussion known to my class at the start of the lessons. I felt this disclosure was necessary for the discussions of controversial issues to develop more organically.

The results of the research were encouraging. For instance, quantitative and qualitative data revealed that the students were engaged in the discussion of controversial issues. Out of 40 students, 26 conducted independent research before the discussion of issues as evidenced by the notes that they submitted. More than half of the students (26 students) changed their initial stance on an issue, based on their response in the Likert scale on the survey. Delving deeper into the data, I found out that out of these 26 students, 6 students had a complete change of stance after listening to the opinions of others during their discussion.

Based upon the findings, I felt validated that the student-centered structured discussion about complex issues was beneficial and preferable as an approach when introducing controversial issues for primary school students. By making my views known, I also opened myself up to be vulnerable as I welcomed students to challenge my views. I felt this exposure would encourage some of my reserved students to make known their views too.

The positive experience emboldened me to plan a similar lesson with a different group of Primary Six students this year. I felt that I was opening up my students' mind towards issues that they would not have otherwise encountered in Social Studies. The use of structured discussion provided students with the opportunity to have a dialogue about the issues in a safe environment yet girded by a framework so that the discussion would not go off tangent. As the teacher who was carrying out the lesson, I had taught the class for the last two years and created what I felt was a sufficiently safe environment where the students could engage in conversation without fear of ridicule and contempt of their ideas from others.

However, upon deeper reflection and with some space and time from the teaching event of last April, I now question some of my assumptions and observations of the class. Admittedly, I had tried to ensure a safe environment to have a dialogue by laying down ground rules to be observed by all students and cultivating a conducive open classroom culture. For instance, everyone should have an equal opportunity to speak and there should be no interruption when someone was giving their opinion. I had hoped that in this way there would not be a monopoly of voices, especially by the boys who outnumbered the girls quite significantly (25 boys to 15 girls). However, notwithstanding my ground rules, I now deliberate on how safe the girls or even anyone in my class really felt in voicing out their opinions. Despite the data and my observation of the liveliness of the discussion, could it be that they, as Ellsworth (1989) suggests, "are not talking in their authentic voice" (p. 313)? There could be a possibility that they might have self-censored their initial opinion or "they were encoded, on the basis of speaker's conscious and unconscious assessment of the risks and costs of disclosing their understandings of themselves and of others" (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 313). I could not completely discount that notion.

Besides the gender inequality which

might have contributed to some students' editing or modifying their responses, I also did not take into account racial "silencing" that might be present when "Others" place themselves against the archetypal myth of dominant groups in society. Chinese students comprised the dominant race of the class (approximately 78%). Therefore, instead of the myth of the ideal rational person being "European, White, male, middle class, Christian, able-bodied, thin and heterosexual" (Ellsworth, 1989, p.304), the dominant mythical types in my class might very well be Chinese, male and pubertal.

Dialogue is regarded as the lynchpin of critical pedagogy. Not surprisingly, it is defined as "a fundamental imperative of critical pedagogy and the basis of the democratic education that insures a democratic state" (Ellsworth, 1989, p.314). In employing dialogue in my classroom, I was attempting to transform it into a microcosm of the society where "students and teachers can engage in a process of deliberation and discussion…to prepare students as critically active citizens outside of schools" (Ellsworth, 1989, p.314).

However, in choosing dialogue as the approach, the assumptions would be that when armed with the analytical skills to consider an issue objectively, students would be free and rational to make objective and informed decisions. I did not entertain the possibility that students might still be holding on to their views due to non-rational or emotional reasons. How sure could I be sure that my students were not employing stalling strategies that Hand and Levinson (2012) suggest, such as "that's-just-what-I-believe move" and the "that's-what-my-religion-says move" (p.620)?

However, I believed that by listening to views from others and armed with their own research, my students would be empowered to make up their mind on a particular issue. Instead of being empty containers to be filled by my knowledge, the students, as Freire (2000) envisaged were no longer docile and accepting but critical and engaged in dialogue. However, just how empowered were they? Was I overstating their agency and empowerment by deliberately silencing or downplaying my power and influence as the teacher? That thought was sobering and not an impossibility.

In reexamining my experience while carrying out the action research and critically assessing my hidden assumptions of past actions and decisions, I am conscious of my teaching objectives. The crux of it is that I am striving towards transforming my practice and that of my students' learning experience. And in order to transform their learning experiences, some of the crucial things to bear in mind would be to acknowledge the importance of bringing into prominence students' voices in discussing topics that they feel an affinity to rather than prescribed by teachers. It is noteworthy that topics of interest to the students are highly significant societal issues as well. This shows that students are cognizant of current issues in the society that they live in where they are active participants in their own ways. Although the students' voices may not be as authentic due to possible racial and gender silencing that I highlighted, the available platform to discuss issues provides the opportunity for their voices to be heard nonetheless.

This aspiration to transform my practice to enrich my students' learning experience finds affinity to the educational purpose described by Naomi Norquay who sagely points out that "this work is not merely knowledge accumulation. It is change" (Pinar et al. 1995, p. 566). In revisiting data sources from my study about a now past teaching experience and imagining a

possible future for myself and my students' learning, my focus is for the change to happen in the present.

References

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