

Adventures in Authentic Teaching and Learning

To me, there isn't much to see that is worth getting on a plane for 14 hours. But I've just returned from a week in Hawaii during which I learned about a pedagogy developed at the University of Hawaii called Philosophy for Children Hawaii (p4cHI). I was first introduced to this program at the National Council for the Social Studies conference last November, and after hearing Dr. Amber Strong Makaiau speak, felt compelled to learn more. What exactly did I hear? I heard about a pedagogy that is grounded in a community of intellectual safety, where teachers and students are co-inquirers in authentic exploration of meaningful content. Through their exploration, students acquire and practice the tools of philosophical inquiry – the “good thinkers toolkit” that provides the framework for making meaning of the topics at hand. The role of the teacher is not to dispense knowledge, but to guide, facilitate and model the use of these tools so that students can acquire knowledge and create meaning for themselves. The first principle of the philosopher's pedagogy is, in fact, the “examined life of the teacher.” Only through his or her own awareness of and authentic connection to the process can the teacher be that guide for students.

These ideas resonated closely with my own philosophy of teaching and learning, based on conclusions and principles I've come to in my own years of teaching and learning among different groups and in diverse settings. Like many new teachers, I'd been frustrated by my inability to translate the teaching that was in my head into the reality of my classroom. Even more frustrating was the lack of support from the larger community for ideas like these – because they often conflict with the direction of school policy and the movement towards standardization, or they just make people a little uncomfortable. It does require a shift in thinking about the role of teachers and their relationship to students. It has been difficult to find colleagues that are willing to simply have conversations about these things, never mind work on developing the curriculum and pedagogy that supports them. To be fair, teachers are being squeezed from many directions and have to respond to many directives, and there is often little energy left over for philosophical ideas that don't seem to fit with the prevailing paradigm and standards they are being held to.

The irony is that pedagogy like p4cHI can help teachers meet the demands that are being placed on them AND create classroom environments in which they and their students can engage, think, wonder, and thrive. It is within the process of philosophical inquiry (no matter the subject) that students acquire the tools of good thinking and also confront themselves. Beyond mere memorization of facts and discrete bits of knowledge, teachers and students alike learn to question deeply and explore the ideas and meaning embedded within their content to more fully understand themselves and their world. When I was in Hawaii, I was able to participate in several p4cHI inquiries, in classrooms ranging from elementary through senior high school. One inquiry began with a student-generated question about the necessity of assemblies to address the issue of bullying at school. Through the course of the structured, student-led discussion, we explored topics of power, right and wrong, the concept of self, honesty, and the development of identity. In a fourth grade classroom, the question of whether or not money is the root of all evil led us to question, among other things, the nature of money and value, the concept of evil, responsibilities of individuals and communities, human needs, and greed.

I was reminded of the ideas of Parker Palmer: that good teaching is neither teacher-centered nor student-centered, but subject centered, and comes from the authentic exploration of the “great things” of each discipline around which we gather. It is this exploration that puts value in education. It is not simply about learning content, but about what that content means and can ultimately teach us about ourselves. P4cHI is not THE way to do this, but a way. It is a way that is inherently respectful of

community, and full of potential to empower students with the thinking skills, knowledge and awareness that our world so needs. This was worth 14 hours on a plane...to begin to work with a pedagogy in my own classroom that does not simply prepare students to live in the world as it is, but perhaps enables them to create the world as we hope it can be.

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April 2015