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Vignette 5

Who we are matters: An autoethnography of Global Citizenship Education in intersectionally diverse contexts

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Abstract

This autoethnography explores the pedagogy of Global Citizenship Education (GCE), or Peace Education (PE) in two very diverse contexts. Teaching and learning with the same outcomes in mind in South Central Los Angeles and at an International University requires different praxis to engage deeply with the context. By exploring the relationship between power, privilege and the binary of the global and the local, the author reflects on how to improve teaching practices through critical self-reflection.

This autoethnographical research is an evaluation of teaching praxis (Freire, 2005) at intersectionally (Crenshaw, 1991) diverse universities. As a professor of Peace Education (PE) at two higher education institutions that have very diverse populations I have had to adjust my GCE praxis in every course in relation to the context of the students that I am working with. This research seeks to critically reflect on those experiences and to seek lessons that can be applied in other contexts.

I should note that I consider myself a peace educator first and foremost and yet I regard peace education and global citizenship education to be highly connected, in terms of content, values, skills and behaviors that are engaged. I prefer the term peace education for a number of reasons, but primarily because I believe peace education more strongly implicates peace pedagogy. It focuses not only on what we teach, but also how we teach it. Working from a Freirean perspective, this pedagogy of

liberation is integral to my praxis as a critical peace educator. Engaging with an educational community means being in dialog based on mutual respect, empathy, and learning from the community we are with. In this way, each university, class, and student require an adjustment of self that creates the connection necessary for deep learning. I do not claim to be always successful in this endeavor, but I am continuously striving to improve through a process of critical self-reflection. This vignette is a part of that process describing my efforts at adjustment at two very different institutions.

The first institution was in South Central Los Angeles and the population drew from marginalized neighborhoods nearby that were dominated by Latinx or African American/Black populations. Those groups in that area had a history of animosity, and that prejudice had a tendency to manifest in the classroom as well. In this case, the language of GC was challenged by students that felt that the globe was not something they could access due to financial limitations, and in the case of some students, due to documentation issues. They are often the first generation of their family to access university education and they are firmly rooted in their communities. These students have a deep understanding on a visceral level of structural violence and social injustice and they tend to be wary of systems of power; global citizenship then can be seen as extending the structures of power that negatively affect their lives to a global level. A student from one of my classes remembered volunteering in high school to be part of a program that took students from her neighborhood to do activities in a predominantly White school that was only 20 minutes away by bus. She remembered that it was the first time she had seen new textbooks, and that in general seeing the difference in the conditions at this other school was the first time she was able to see a physical representation of something she had always suspected was true. She and other students at the LA University (LAU) were highly motivated to seek solutions to the violence and injustice they saw around them on a daily basis and did not see the global issues as their concern, as they rightly felt they had enough to deal with in their home communities.

At the LAU, I was given the opportunity to teach a UNV101 class, a course for first year students (primarily first-generation university students) which has the combined goals of teaching them the necessary skills for university success and allowing professors to teach their 'dream course': the content they're most excited about. I chose 'violence: its causes, consequences and solutions' and I had the privilege of being allowed to co-construct my syllabi with my students. On the first day of class I simply said to them: "You know the title of the course, what do you want to learn about?" At first, they were a bit taken aback, as though no one had ever asked them that before. But as I gave a few examples, they began to get more excited about the brainstorming session. In the end they had more than enough topics to cover the 16

sessions of the class. We went through a voting process and ended up with topics such as gang violence, domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment, interpersonal violence, intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, emotional abuse, economic abuse, and hate crimes, which I then built into a cohesive syllabus. The topics they had chosen were ones that they were familiar with from their lived experiences and they were interested in understanding what they saw 'on the daily.' No student expressed interest in the ongoing war in Afghanistan (although students knew people who were serving in the armed forces). No one mentioned the conflict in Syria, although it was major news at the time.

As their professor, this presented a dilemma for me. I am a highly privileged White person who has had the opportunity to travel and live extensively on other continents. I am deeply interested in the connections between local actions and global consequences. Often, my own perspective as a 'global citizen' comes through in my teaching as I look to examples from multiple contexts, to which I would joke with my students: "I know, my privilege is showing." But although I joke, the dialogic nature of the course meant that students consistently brought up examples from their own lives, as they should, as we work from our lived experience in the Freirean process. This had the effect of focusing the conversation clearly on the local instead of the global, which they had not accessed, neither in their lived experience, nor through other types of exposure, as the schools they had attended were forced to be test focused. Students expressed that in their high schools they only engaged with information that was on the standardized exams, and those exams had very limited global content. As their lived experiences were so rich and varied in their local, but multicultural and multilingual environment, there were more than enough examples to talk about the themes of the peace education courses, such as empathy, othering, nonviolent communication, economic systems of oppression, cycles of violence, etc. The participants had very positive feedback for the courses and I know that we learned together in ways that were deep and meaningful. At the same time, I wonder if I did them a disservice by not pushing to include more international content. In a way, did I fall into the same trap as their secondary school teachers, doing what seemed necessary and was effective, and yet, perhaps it wasn't right?

The second institution is an international university (IU) that is specifically focused on studying and promoting peace. One may assume that this implies shared values, but that is often not the case. In fact, each course offers new challenges in relation to values. The students come from all over the world, usually with 40–50 countries represented each year. If we are to apply binary thinking the students can be roughly divided into two groups in several ways: those who are able to pay the tuition and those who receive scholarships, those that believe in the existing systems and structures and want to be a part of them and those that do not, and those that are

conscious and aware of power and privilege and those who are not. Generally, these students embrace the ideas of cosmopolitanism and GC, although they often have competing visions of how these theories are or should be enacted.

The pedagogical shift from the LAU to the IU was a slow and exploratory process. Once again using the Freirean dialogical model, we worked from our lived experiences. Whereas the LAU students were highly aware of the underlying conflicts that existed in their classroom community, the international students were often caught off-guard by the ideas of others. These students who come to the university with the idea that they can be part of a global movement to improve the world, often start from having to recognize how either their nation or their individual perspective is seen as either 'part of' or 'the' problem itself, which can be very confronting. Conflicts at the university are often grounded in nationalist or gendered perspectives, in both cases those involved often find it very surprising that their nationalism or gendered perspective is problematic to others. In LAU, all of the students were keenly aware of power and were highly adapted to recognizing it (both within themselves and in others) and engaging with it in ways that minimize violence (be it verbal or physical). In the IU this was not always the case. The pedagogical model I had to adapt in the case of GCE in this space was much more contentious. As most of these students did want to see themselves as global citizens, the dialogs we engage in encourage a type of critical self-reflection that some students find offensive, and most find challenging.

When reflecting on these teaching experiences, it is the times that I have failed that come to mind, and not the successes. As part of the decolonizing process I ask students to consider how they themselves are racist and sexist,[1] working from the assumption that we all internalize systems of oppression, and in the case of these students, both local and global prejudices have been taught to them, whether consciously or not. In these discussions I remember students saying things like:

> Racism doesn't exist in Europe.
> Women in Poland/Russia have equality so that's a problem for other countries.
> We have human rights in the West, so we just need to bring everyone else up to speed.
> In my religion, homosexuality doesn't exist.

In these moments I often wait to see if that worldview will be challenged by a classmate before beginning to question the ideas myself. All of the students are being exposed to very different worldviews (many for the first time) and need guided reflection to work through their conflicting perspectives. In this context I am concerned that my pedagogical model has become too confronting, and that perhaps I should provide more emotional support for those students who feel that my learning objectives and the methods I use to achieve them are too stressful? Confronting someone's

worldview, even through the gentlest questioning, is inherently challenging and students are not always interested in engaging in these dialogs.

In both universities the PE or GCE content of my courses has been very similar, and yet the focus within that content has been quite different. For example, when teaching conflict transformation and non-violent communication at the LAU the focus was on self and others, while at the IU, the conversation tends towards intergroup or international conflicts. When performing cultural and structural violence analysis the LAU students focused on the local, while IU students often discuss the global. When we learn strategic nonviolent resistance, the LAU students were interested in civic or national themes, while the IU students tend to focus on changing global social and economic systems. In both cases the students learn the skills of violence analysis, conflict transformation, nonviolent communication, and strategic nonviolent resistance. In both cases we focus on the values of empathy, creativity, equity, open-mindedness, community, justice and responsibility. I would argue that these skills and values are common between peace education and global citizenship education. However, due to the nature of the populations at the LAU and the IU the focus of the dialogs surrounding these issues leaned more towards the local or national in one context and the global in another. Using a Freirean pedagogy based in dialogue and reflection making connections between theory and lived experience lead to this distinction. It is my belief that the depth of learning in both cases was similar and that in both cases the students now have a new way of interpreting the world (this is reflected in their written evaluations). However, I am consistently asking myself if my teaching practices are just in themselves. For example, clearly the local and the global are intricately connected and breaking down this binary is part of the work of peace and global citizenship education, and yet by following the students' lead I have not always been successful in making these connections explicit. This is not in any way an attempt to strive for perfection, as in fact, I do not believe there is one 'right' way to teach; my goal is to constantly improve.

This leads me to questions such as, what could I have done/can I do, to deepen our learning and our sense of community together (both locally and globally)? What could I have done to make the identity of 'global citizen' more accessible to the students at the LAU (if indeed that is a desirable identity for them to have access to)? What can I do to help my IU students to better see the global structures that are reflected and reproduced in their local spaces? In what ways are my educational practices neo-colonial? What steps can I take to decolonize myself and my practices? I believe these are the questions that we need to be asking ourselves if we consider ourselves peace educators or global citizenship educators. A teaching practice based on critical self-reflection in relation to the context is the starting point for creating pedagogies for positive change. When we become prescriptive regarding content,

skills, values, and pedagogies, without leaving space for contextual adaptation, we risk becoming that which we reject in the dominant paradigm.

Note

1. Or ableist, homophobic, ageist, etc., thinking through these issues from an intersectional perspective.

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