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Poetic Praxis:  
Engaging Body, Mind, and Soul in the Social Foundations Classroom

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## Abstract

Across the space of this paper I seek to share a particular attempt to holistically engage students enrolled in a Social Foundations of Education course, in the process of de(con)structing knowledge, through the work of collectively creating found poetry. I do not seek to show right pedagogical practice; rather, it is my hope that this paper may offer a glimpse of the possibilities that exist when we embrace arts-informed, epistemological practices that acknowledge the whole student, engaging the mind/body/soul in praxis, through acts of fluid co-creation and (re)construction of knowledge.

*Keywords: Social Foundations, Found Poetry, Pedagogy, Arts-based Poetic Praxis:  
Engaging Body, Mind, and Soul in the Social Foundations Classroom*

Silence an  
abstraction of  
self  
(un)spoken

waiting

for the beginning

a signal directing  
the student toward  
thought

When, however, a person chooses to view herself or himself in the midst of things, as a beginner or learner or explorer, and has the imagination to envisage new things emerging, more and more begins to seem possible. (Greene 1995, p. 22)

A circle

bodies breathing

anticipation a reaction

guarded response

to predetermined choreography

what happens when

we begin to improvise?

We live in a world of fear and anticipation where objectives and truth trump experience. (Greene, 1995). This world is reflected in the classroom, where even when we try to create circular spaces for dialogue and praxis, we often find students fidgeting uncomfortably, exposed and seemingly unprepared to perform a pedagogical dance outside what has been choreographed for them, the norm that they have for so long identified to be learning and knowing. What happens though, when we invite students to enter into the midst, to sit with the discomfort, challenging them to revisit their perceptions of learning and knowing, self and other? Do we find them engaged in improvisation, moving within the space, negotiating relationships as they explore new

ideas and ways of knowing or do they wait for the direction, remaining stagnant, resistant to movement outside the familiar comfort of an instructor's answer? Within this article I seek to explore these questions within the context of a pedagogical story that emerged as I attempted to holistically engage the undergraduate students in my Social Foundations of Education course in the work of imaginative (re)engagement/arrangement with knowledge, through the process of using the arts, in this case poetry generated by students, as an epistemological/dialogical tool. The purpose of this exploration is not to offer prescriptive directions that might lead to critical engagement, but rather to create the space for a dialog that might explore the possibility of arts-informed pedagogical practices as tools of reflection that lead to agency in one's work toward informed, social change within the social foundations classroom. In particular, I seek to consider how poetry may create spaces for lively, communal engagement with theory, self, and others, moving both ourselves and our students further toward reflexivity, praxis, and poiesis—with/in the context of relationship and imagination. I strive to accomplish this goal by not only exploring the experience of using poetry within the context of a social foundations of education course, but also another form of inquiry within the space of this text. As Leggo (2008) shares, "Poetry invites us to experiment with language, to create, to know, to engage creatively and imaginatively [and spiritually] with experience" (p.165). Throughout the text, poetry is included as a means to create further opportunity for connection as well as openings for new possibilities and ways of making sense of the value of arts-informed epistemologies.

### **Searching With/in Inscription's Shadow**

Only when the given or taken-for-granted is subject to questioning, only when we take various, sometimes unfamiliar perspectives on does it show itself as what it is—contingent on many interpretations, many vantage points, unified (if at all) by conformity of unexamined common sense. (Greene 1995, p. 23)

They speak

truths told

(in)scriptions

fixed

in the shadow

of the folds of an/other

truth

to be (re)covered

When my students arrive in Social Foundations, a long established course that is required of all Education majors, as well as a general education requirement of our highly selective, northeastern university, they are generally eager to receive the information—the answers that might explain or reflect their own experiences as students and provide a direction toward exact answers in terms of the purpose of education and what makes an education good. Ultimately, the main goal for many is to get/do what they need in order to achieve success, which is generally conceived of in the form of an A. They are often unaware of the complexity of understanding within a social context, in this case education, and are unaware of the role their (own) experiences play in shaping perceptions, unaware of the etchings upon their own thoughts that position and privilege certain ways of being, knowing, and feeling.

This is particularly evident when students are exposed to ways of seeing education that contradict their previously established beliefs. For instance, when I share Kimberly Dark's (2009) poem, "My Son is a Straight A Student," they often have strong reactions when she comments, "I would like him to quit school ... I am afraid of what he is not learning while he is trying to get an education ... I'm afraid of what he is learning..." (pp. 171-172). Many of them are eager to condemn her perspective and remark, "You have to learn this structure of bells and disciplines, time keeping and rule following, in order to be successful." They rely on institutional norms, recognizing them as Truth, believing knowledge is fixed, situated in the mind, and that they will find the answers in the texts they read or the notes they take, and that this understanding will be demonstrated through correct responses on a test. Often in the fearful quest for the correct answer, students see only the words, the answers rather than the whole—bodies, minds, and souls/spirits be(com)ing together in experience, temporally constructed and acting. This is problematic as it creates a landscape of silence, both within the context of the classroom as well as in relationship to their own reflective thinking, where dialog is seen as an "emotional" construction that deters one from arriving at a sense of knowing that is reflexive and embodied. This is not a new point of view within education. Eisner reminds us that "Emotion has long been regarded the enemy of reflective thought," a phenomenon outside intellect, clouding thought rather than a contributing piece of a larger, holistic kind of knowing; instead, of acknowledging the role of emotion, the mindset remains—"The more we feel, the less we know" (1998, p. 80). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) comment,

A disembodied mind permits the certainty needed by technical rationalism. To put the body back into the mind is to wreak havoc with certainty. Emotion, value, felt experience with the world, memory, and narrative explanations of one's past do not stand still in a way that allows for certainty (p. 37).

This emphasis on the rational is embedded deeply upon the consciousness of students as they enter the classroom, viewing emotion and knowledge, aesthetics and truth, as binaries, unrelated and contradictory. Through this perspective, material/information is separated from the self, from the other, and the earth—disconnecting experience and understanding, the spiritual, reflective, and imaginative self with the knowing self. In fact, as Bushnell and Henry (2003) point out, students are often unaware that knowing has any relationship to the self they identify themselves to be.

The disconnect between the spiritual, aesthetic, and emotional practice of knowing and intellectual knowing is problematic in that it offers little opportunity for critical awareness of the factors that shape our perceptions. Without awareness and integration, knowledge remains as something that is unemotional and fixed rather than something that is imaginative, holistic, fluid and dialogic, co-written by all actors with/in the experience. As an educator who operates within a holistic critical/constructivist pedagogy, I work hard to create a classroom landscape that promotes “dialogic inquiry” and in-between-ness (Ferrer 2003) disrupting the discourse of Truth, the perspective that the professor is “all knowing” and that knowledge is fixed, certain, existing as something separate from the whole. While these attempts are at times met with resistance the rewards for both myself and my students are worth the effort, evident in this email reflection from a student about the integration of poetry in the classroom:

I think the poetry especially allowed everyone to open up a little and really get into the material. It certainly made me think of the class more as an open forum where *opinions* can be shared, and it especially helped me to articulate my thoughts on those concepts more by having to form them into a poem. I think it really helped the class to look at the material (and at each other) in a new way (Ella, Personal Communication, October 2010).

Through dialogic and epistemological integration, we can begin to enter into a space where knowledge is something that can be (re)written to acknowledge multiple facets of experience, recognizing and challenging ideology, and offering new possibilities for understanding as well as opportunities for praxis—action/change within education. This is not a fast process; however, as students become more comfortable negotiating within the (un)known, that space of in-between, they learn new ways to relate to knowledge as well as self and other, and in these new relationships perceptions shift toward action and imagination—praxis, rather than simply reception and repetition.

### **Positions of Insistence**

To remain a private thinker means that one’s scholarship, one’s thinking, teaching, and writing, are engaged in self-overcoming, the surpassing of the historical, sedimented “self” one has been conditioned and, perhaps, required to be. (Pinar, 2004, p. 22)

The goal within my Social Foundations of Education course is to place my students in the midst, where they move beyond “private thinking” (Pinar 2004) toward social inquiry where self (mind/body/soul) and other enter into an imaginative space of dialogical relationship, poiesis, and praxis.

Gathers on the sand

weigh heavily

upon the landscape

etched collections of the past

frame the earth

an echo

of our fearing

the (im)possibilities

of water

Water, like experience, leaves etchings upon the landscape, and society fears what disrupting those etchings might elicit, fears the unknown, the (un)certain; instead we cling to the tangible creations of truth that may shield us from uncertainty. In Pink Floyd's popular film, *The Wall*, we find ourselves confronted with what we hope is not a reality within schools, specifically the assembly line where students are sorted and organized accordingly. There is no room for creativity, but rather the expectation is one of "sameness" where silence is the norm. As an educator, I always cringe when I see this depiction; however in my own experience, it is not that far from what many students know to be school. This is certainly the case in my Social Foundations of Education course where the majority of the students have been tracked for success. Ultimately, the desire on the part of most the students is to be successful while finding the "formula" that enables that success. While the group of students who were involved in the pedagogical experience I seek to highlight in this article was unique for our primarily white, upper/upper-middle class university in that it was quite diverse, many of them still had a significant fear of failure. Identifying themselves as hard and intelligent workers, they had also fallen into a trap of perspective that Darling-Hammond (1998) remarks to be "... the prevailing view that if student do not achieve, it is both their fault and their sole burden to bear" (p. 81). Having accepted the ideology of meritocracy and intelligence, many struggled to see that there were other aspects that may have positioned them in a place of privilege as well as a place of discomfort within alternative, arts-informed pedagogies. Grumet (1988) thoughtfully points out, "Only in schools does text become the spectacle, and we the dazed spectators, eyes glazed, sit in mute reception waiting for something to appear" (pp 143-144). My students were familiar with these passive approaches to learning. They had found comfort in the idea that learning was something definitive, an achievement that might be proven by correct responses on a test. However, they were somewhat resistant to a private or introspective and reflexive engagement with the whole self, mind/body/soul that might lead to dialogue and praxis. It can be uncomfortable to consider that what we have known, the old standbys we have leaned on for success, what has come to define us, might be flawed, but for praxis, this consideration is necessary.



Action confuses

me

movement

without predictability

self

without definition

I want to know

searching within the caverns of my mind

but I am enveloped by darkness

which creeps upon my consciousness

a blanket I cannot name

What must I do with this new sensation

or is must even necessary?

### **Mind/Body/Soul: Learning as spiritual**

In our most familiar discourse, mind is separate from the body and given an ascendant and controlling position in relation to the matter of bodies. It is thus our minds that we are practiced at knowing rather than our bodies. (Davies, p. 19)

Spelling lists

and algorithms

we learn to memorize

images of Truth

erasing

what we once knew

For many, including the students enrolled in Social Foundations of Education, the intellect or the mind serves as a safe space, a sight of self control and imagined fullness. Martusewicz (1997) remarks: "We search for identity, for connection to the world, and for

love, and at the same time, we seek transcendence from this imperfect ‘humanity,’ this essential emptiness of being” (p. 102). While, in a spiritual sense, the soul is that sight of transcendence, we fear this ambiguous site that exists outside the ego and thus find comfort in the space of the concrete mind, the false ego. It is within the mind, we—ourselves and our students—are often under the impression that we may rebuild, acquire the knowledge and find the focus to create the self we think we want to be. These ideas have been conditioned within us in the midst of repetitive tasks of memorization, moving toward answers defined by someone else, answers that school, as an institution, tells us will lead us to success. It is through these tasks that we learn the importance of intellect, the mind and the importance of filling that space with external answers that might fill the emptiness, allowing us to move further toward perfection. However, this type of focus on learning that places the emphasis on habits of mind and filling the mind emphasize, in fact, a sort of mindlessness that numbs us from experience and disturbs many opportunities for relationship. In the ongoing search for *answers* we forget to be present within the moment to the movements of the mind/body/spirit, the stories of the soul, and interaction with others. Grumet (1988) highlights that, “Dominated by kits and dittos, increasingly mechanized and impersonal, most of our classrooms cannot sustain human relationships of sufficient intimacy to support the risks, the trust, and the expression that learning requires” (p. 56). Definitions of pedagogy and expectation have been etched into our consciousness, shaping our actions and desires within the classroom, distancing one from self, other, and praxis. These etchings often lead both educators and students to cling to the mind and those answers that are offered, in fear of the (im)perfection that they “know” deep down, defines them, (im)perfection of the mind/body/soul that must be erased, silenced. Thus we stick to the mind/intellect, distancing ourselves from those other aspects of self that may reveal our vulnerability. Yet, it is within vulnerability where we might enter in spaces of praxis where mind/body/soul exist in relationship, connected, thus allowing for an embodied relationship with experience and knowing possibilities.

De Cossen (2002) comments that “For many ... teachers [and students] their ... self is often neglected, hidden, even repressed to conform to the ‘norm’ that is teacher [student]” (p. 11). This is a norm that fails to acknowledge the body as knowing, privileging only the mind, leaving us disconnected, with the phantom pain of one who has lost a limb; however the norms offer us safety, logical predictions toward success within the social. Shapiro (1999) intimates, “Both the body and the mind mingle together in a continuous stream of interpretations we call knowledge” (p. 33). The body moves, experiences life through the senses that are then interpreted by the mind. These interpretations then return to the body, memories that continue to live within the cells of our body and the spaces of our intellect, shaping future ways of knowing and being across space and time. Both the body and the mind are needed to facilitate deep understanding, yet even when we arrive at these understandings we may still find ourselves disconnected. This sense of disconnection arises from the yearnings of an *inner life* (Palmer, 1998), that place inside ourselves where mind/body/soul continue to interact, in search for fulfillment, where we continue to seek the intangible, unnamable truths about ourselves in the world. This concept of soul is an important one to take into consideration when we reflect upon the needs of students and also an important facet of the learning self. Instead of simply focusing on intellect or body, both of which play an

essential role in coming to know, it is necessary to see our students as multi-faceted and whole: body/mind/spirit (soul). “You educate the soul” as Moore (2005) suggests:

by giving it the things in life it needs: love, beauty, spirit, pleasure. You teach a person how to focus on soul, how to live poetically and aesthetically, how to step into eternity. In this kind of education time and eternity always intersect; one doesn't dominate the other. You aim toward the fullness of life and its empty spaces, and you avoid the tendency to be overly busy and literally void. You create conditions and allow the soul to manifest itself. (p. 15)

The body/mind do not exist unilaterally, but, rather, exist in relationship, a part of something larger that can never be defined. It is this relationship where the soul comes into play. The soul is the connection, the line that unites us, the mind/body with the other, both like and unlike ourselves. The soul is the breath, the light, our humanity that allows us to enter into full relationship. However, all too often we remain disconnected relying only on the mind/body for our answers. To acknowledge the soul requires a spiritual awareness. Educational institutions often shy away from spirituality within learning, perceiving it within the normalized images drawn from religion. Yet it is this spirituality that offers mind/body/soul the opportunity to enter into relationship, where one discover s/he is no longer bound to Truth, but instead part of a whole—the larger landscape of selves, earth, and other (Davies, 1992, p. 83). It is this whole that provides one the opportunity to fully engage with the moment, mind/body/soul, actively engaging with/in a space of aporia (de Cossen, 2002) and relationship (un)becoming a knower of truth.

Learning is a dance of the spiritual holistic, where emotion and intellect intertwine with those aspects of self—mind/body/soul that shape our interactions with experience and text. This interaction encourages a dialog of awareness among facets of self as well as with an other. Irigaray (2004) comments “Spiritual progress can be understood, then, as the development of communication between us, in the form of individual and collective dialogue” (p. 8). This dialog is important, as it allows us to see learning from multiple perspectives, where stories and individuals intertwine along multiple planes of truth and experience. When we begin to see, to embrace the whole of learning, the position of mind/body/soul in relationship across the landscape of understanding, it becomes easier to let go of attachment to absolutes as we move closer to embracing the ambiguous qualities of a self who is both fluid and fixed, personal and public.

### **Currere/Poetry as Method**

The method of *currere*—the infinitive form of curriculum—promises no quick fixes. On the contrary, this autobiographical method asks us to slow down, to remember, even re-enter the past, to meditatively imagine the future. Then, slowly and in one's own terms, one analyzes one's experience of the past and fantasies of the future in order to understand more fully, with more complexity and subtlety, one's submergence in the past. (Pinar, 2004, p. 4)

Through the looking glass she wanders

yearning for the (un)spoken

with speed she cannot grasp

breath fast, she stops

and in the pause

discovers

where

who

she is

Much of education places an emphasis on looking forward. Instead of being present within the learning experience, far too often educators remain focused on how the experience will end. As goals and outcomes shape the educator's vocabulary, our students have a strong awareness of these expectations. However, it is important to recognize that if we always look forward, we forget to look around and within ourselves. To arrive at deep and transformational understandings, students need to have opportunities to fully engage with the historical present, developing an awareness of the larger whole of experience, that which cannot simply be imagined or written upon the page by one. Transformational learning occurs when, through integrated experience, mind/body/soul enter into a dialog with self, finally speaking to and with another. Arts-informed and discussion based learning can serve as a powerful way to open up opportunities for dialog, as a student in the course noted, remarking:

I enjoyed the creative artistic activities that we did throughout the class. It was nice to do things different from other classes that I have been in. It is also easier to discuss things within small groups before moving to the entire class which we often did. I liked that the class was discussion based because I got to hear many different perspectives on different issues. (James, Personal Communication, October 2010)

Learning is autobiographical, situated in experience, engaging students in the work of thinking/sensing in a space of "autobiographicality (Cavell, 1994, p.10), in which one's view are taken to be just that" (Pinar, 2004, p. 33). Engaging the autobiographical within curriculum invites teachers and students to question those elements that shape perspective, understanding of self, other and the world, interrogating knowledge through the lens of the personal as a means to create a larger public dialog of discovery and understanding. "The writing of poetry profoundly alters the writer because the process faces one with oneself" (Bolton, 1999, p. 118), and as one grows in relationship to self, s/he begins to establish a

stronger connection with those outside the self. Pinar (2004) identifies that “the method of *currere* reconceptualize[s] curriculum from course objectives to a complicated conversation with oneself (as a “private” intellectual), an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engaged pedagogical action—as a private-and-public intellectual” (p. 37). While this might initially be seen as narcissistic in nature, it in fact is transformative as the gaze becomes something to (re)analyze as something that is inscribed, shifting and temporal. We begin with the inner landscape, for this is what we know, but weaving that in relationship to the inner and historical landscape broadens one’s perspective (re)writing and disrupting boundaries, creating space for acknowledgement of the soul, establishing relationship beyond simply the mind/body, but rather with self and other as a whole. Abigail illustrates this emerging relationship, stating:

I think the poetry especially allowed everyone to open up a little and really get into the material. It certainly made me think of the class more as an open forum where *opinions* can be shared, and it especially helped me to articulate my thoughts on those concepts more by having to form them into a poem. I think it really helped the class to look at the material (and at each other) in a new way. (Personal Communication, October 2010)

Poetry engages the body/mind/soul in an aesthetic, intellectual response that allows students the opportunity to enter into the ambiguous space of (un)knowing and (dis)connection, creating relationship that is both undefined and transitional. It is within the ambiguity of this space that one finds herself grasping for some sense of self and experience—searching for meaning. Poetry offers one a way of (re)writing self-other and the world, reflecting the method of *currere* (Pinar, 2004), where autobiography becomes curriculum. Poetry allows one to “intensify” the living experience (Dobyns, 2003); neither the reader nor writer simply tells/reads of an experience, rather s/he becomes a part of experience (re)created with deeper chasms and echoes that resonate across one’s consciousness. Poetry offers the quintessential experiential curriculum where through the senses we enter into the autobiographical—an autobiographical that is *currere*, in that the text is a living creation, a kaleidoscope of subjectivities entering into dialogue. Through those multiple and collective stories of experience, we begin to transform within a space of praxis—praxis that is not possible without connection or soul. Leggo (2008) notes that writing autobiographically allows one the opportunity to connect with others as reader and writer work collaboratively to construct meaning within the stories, of which there are many “versions” (p. 90). Davies (2000) articulates, “We are used to thinking of reading and writing as being processed by one part of our bodies, the part we tend to split off from mind—the brain” (p. ). Poetry acknowledges the position of the mind but through the quality of the language it successfully integrates body and soul into the experience. As mind/body/soul, self and other intertwine through language that enters the sensual/intellectual caverns of our psyches our lenses may change. In other words, Poetry offers us new ways of seeing the world (Young, 2002; Dewey, 1980).

“Poetry reaches back to the structures of memory before words were written down” (Luce-Kapler, 2003, p. 82), blending aesthetic with experience. The aesthetic nature of poetry allows one to be present, yet (dis)connected simultaneously, offering one the opportunity to reposition the self in a historical sense, questioning the moment, the

truth. Poetry invites one to tap into those ways of knowing that exist within our cells, stories and feelings that we struggle to articulate. Poetry starts with the stories we tell ourselves (Leggo, 2008) about the world, experience, possibility, but can evolve into something much greater that simultaneously (re)creates and interrogates within the (re)telling. As Dobyns (2003) remarks, “One writes a poem when one is so taken up by an emotional concept that one is unable to remain silence” (p.2), one writes to find the *whole* “... by dwelling with the fragments” (Leggo, 2008, p. 20) that shape our subjectivities. However, there are times when we do not see the poetry—cannot see the fragments or hear the echoes within the silence. This is often the case when we think of our own students. As we ask them to delve deeper into meaning of both text and experience, we often find them responding with an attitude of “just tell me.” This can especially be the case when we ask our students to draw on the aesthetic as a way of/toward knowing, as Young (2002) reflects,

Art objects interrupt the familiar, notional life or the taken-for-granted meaning of both epistemologies and ontologies by providing an encounter with the *other*. Interrupting the familiar through engagement with a work of art involves and encounter with the *other* which in term implies an encounter with self. (p.1)

The arts as an epistemological tool serve as a powerful way to delve into the social and personal landscapes that shape one’s perspectives of education and the world, inviting one to tap higher order thinking and new forms of communication that transcend those spaces in which we are most comfortable, calling for new creation (Barone, 2009; Eisner, 2009) within the disruption of what one has for so long accepted as “right.” However, our students may struggle with the ambiguity of the new and the disruption of those traditional epistemologies with which they are most comfortable. This does not mean one cannot engage an aesthetic way of knowing like writing poetry, but this may mean that one needs the guidance of another, the pen of a friend to start the process. As educators, we should consider both the possibilities of poetry as a curricular site of autobiographical interrogation; but just as we do this, we must also take into consideration how we might approach the process within our classrooms.

### **Movements Toward Process**

Over the course of the semester the students in my Social Foundations of Education course had been exploring the influences, practices, and possibilities that shaped education in the United States past/present. As part of this inquiry, students were asked to consider how they or others may have been positioned in certain ways based upon certain ideologies. Each class session began with an “essential question” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), or several questions that might help students move toward deeper understanding. In this case the questions were:

How does tracking, as a historical and contemporary practice in education, both cause and support difference? What is intelligence? Who cares? (Class plans, 3/17/2010)

Continuing to draw upon Wiggin's & McTighe's model for planning, the "enduring understanding" was articulated in the following way:

Conceptions of intelligence and standardized testing play a significant role in how students are placed and perceived within the institution of schooling. While generally the intentions behind tracking may be good, there are many issues that contribute to social reproduction and inequality. Because we are generally comfortable with the norm, we often forget to question practices that have been consistent within our own experience. It is important to examine assumptions and consider the opportunities that are offered and lost within the current structures that shape schools. (Class plans, 3/17/2010)

To encourage students to begin to immediately reflect upon the essential questions, they were asked to consider Sacks' (1999) remark:

And, so in this new struggle for opportunity and privilege, the nature of *defective* persons has changed ... But the basic principle and means by which to identify these new defective persons has not changed. Polite society nowadays has its own *defectives* who don't measure up on standardized tests. Once upon a time, they were Italian and Jewish immigrants. Now, they are the poor, the uneducated, African Americans, American Indians, people with learning *disabilities*, those for whom English is a second language, and others. (pp. 33-34)

Students were asked to quietly reflect on this quote as they waited for their identity assignment, which was to be used for a class activity that was modeled after the "privilege walk" (McIntosh, 1998), an activity that asks participants to examine assumed conditions of experience—for instance, "I am confident that I will be able to put food on the table for dinner." Through this walk individuals are invited to move forward or back depending on how realistic these assumptions are within the context of their own lives. While, in McIntosh's approach, individuals draw upon their own experiences, I asked students to assume the identity of someone other than themselves. The identities included descriptions such as: "You are an English language learner who comes from a two parent home"; "You are a decent student who really excels in sports"; etc. The goal was to get students to think about the wide variety of aspects that shape a student's experience and others' perceptions of that student. Once they were assigned these identities, students were asked to line up in the hallway where I read a series of statements that directed them to take a step back or forward. The statements included the following:

- If you consider yourself to be in the position of low/middle socioeconomic status, take a step back.
- If you are of Italian descent, take a step back.
- If you might be considered of Latino descent, take a step back.
- If you grew up in a home with two parents, take a step forward.

- If you are recognized as coming from a high to middle socioeconomic status, take a big step forward.
- If you have relatives of African descent, take a step back.
- If you have parents who have post secondary degrees, take a step forward.
- If you have been identified with a learning disability, take a step back.
  - If you have been successful with all the standardized tests you have had to take, take a step forward.
- If you have struggled with standardized tests, take a step back.
- If you excel in a less traditional academic area (sports, arts, etc.), take a step back.
- If you generally do well in all subjects take a step forward.
- If you are of American Indian descent, take a step back.
- If English is not your first language take a step back.

The image at the end of the activity was very powerful. Few students were in the middle, but there were a number who were pressed up against the back wall or were standing comfortably at the front of the space. Many students found themselves identifying strongly with particular groups, and some even began to question how they may have been positioned or judged unfairly. There were a number of very talented athletes in this course, and it was clear many of them were struggling with how they might have been judged poorly as a result of the strengths that they had. Discussion continued on as we returned to the classroom reflecting upon assumptions, issues of tracking, and the nature of inequality. It was clear, through observation, that this was not simply a discussion of the mind, but additionally, of emotional involvement, as students' mind/body/soul entered into the dialog. They had engaged sensually with intellectual concepts, an engagement that elicited an emotional response. This was a challenging learning experience for many, because it moved them outside the safety of their desks, into positions of vulnerability and discomfort. However, it was this type of holistic engagement that facilitated responses to demonstrate further awareness and a greater sense of praxis

### **Engaging Text through Poetry**

After we discussed observations, students broke up into groups depending on assigned readings. Taking into consideration Grumet's (1988) insight that "Meaning is something we make out of what we find when we look at texts. It is not the text" (p.143), as well as Young's (2002) offering that "Reading poetry as an interpretive practice involves a return to memory and history while constructing new meaning" (Young, p. 2), I had tried to plan an activity that actively engaged the students in the role of reader/writer (Barthes, 1977). Considering Barthes' ideas, I recognize reading and writing are not acts that can be separated; as we write, we are entering into a circular space of (co)construction as multiple subjectivities and senses enter into the discussion. I wanted to create a learning experience that facilitated praxis and integrated experience, allowing the mind/body/soul to enter into a space of dialogic reflexivity, becoming actively involved in a collective act of reading/writing, in response to what the students had read as well as what they had experienced. The creation of found poetry allowed for just such an opportunity. In their groups, students were directed to find those words that they felt



were most significant from the readings—words that helped them answer the following questions, as well as any others they felt were important to consider:

- What is intelligence?
- Who cares?
- Why care?
  - What impact does the concept of intelligence have on an individual's experience/opportunity?
  - Why is intelligence considered?
  - How does (Does) the concept of intelligence contribute to meritocracy?

From the words students had chosen, they were then asked to create a found poem. As a model, I offered them an example, shown on PowerPoint, from one of the whole class readings for the day (Sacks, 2001):

### **Principle Prescription**

Eugenics  
movements  
passed  
Intellectually  
Morally  
Inferior breeds  
misguided  
pioneers tens of  
thousands  
recruits subjected to  
bizarre conclusions  
admission for offspring  
endowed citizenship  
the abilities of man  
allocated justice a  
supposed conclusion  
needed  
for maximum efficiency

Following this example, students were given the rest of the class time to discuss the readings and work on generating their own found poems. As an educator, I find it can be scary to allow students the freedom to engage in aesthetic activities. As they creatively engage with ideas, authority can feel like it is lost. Also, it can be difficult to know while students are in the midst of something whether or not they have gotten the full level of the experience. However, by fully turning the process over to students, simply listening as they talk about the readings in reference to their own lives and choosing the words that stand out the most to them in the context of the readings and the question of the day, my intention was to give them the opportunity to engage holistically with meaning rather than worry

about the oppressive eye of the teacher and perhaps create greater space of creativity and reflection.

### **Poetic Interrogation and Communication**

Humankind has forever been attracted to poetry because of the musicality and poignancy it portrays in the rhythms of its contracted form, and because of the mystery it suggests in the ambiguity it retains. So much can be said in a few works and in such compelling ways. Poetry is an imaginative awareness of the experience expressed through meaning, sound, and rhythmic language choices so as to evoke an embodied response (Flanigan, 2007). It portrays particular qualities of being, elicits metaphorical wondering, synthesizes various modes of perception, and shows a way of paying attention (Wormser & Cappela, 2004). Poetry allows the heart to lead the mind rather than reverse. (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009, p. 3)

Speak

the unspoken

image

self disrupted

shifting equilibrium

toward

a new vision

of darkness

and light

As I have mentioned, there is a certain level of discomfort for educators when they involve their students in aesthetically informed epistemologies; however most of those who choose to engage in this form of pedagogy have already assumed some value in the integration of the arts in learning. In an education course, unless students already see themselves as artists/poets, they often find themselves fearing failure within the space of the unpredictable. Yet, it is this same sense of discomfort that frees them from the “formulas for success” that so many of them cling to. Freed from these formulas, students are able to journey further into their own body/mind/soul consciousness while also relying on others to help them along the journey. Working collaboratively, the students explored the meaning of the words they were choosing to include, in relationship to the article/chapter they had read, other course readings, and their own personal experiences. From this dialogue, students began to consider the important big ideas that they wanted to convey, organizing words according to relationship as well as the type of response this

organization might elicit from a reader. The poems that arose were both thoughtful and powerful, reflecting the subjectivities of each member of the group, while also eliciting an emotional response. As reflected in the following poems created by the students, they were able to engage mind/body/soul through image, rhythm, sound and silence, challenging Truth.

### **Well Intended Pathway**

homogeneous grouping  
ability grouping  
teacher estimates and recommendations  
academic or vocational  
academic ... the brightest  
enriched classes  
learn better  
high ability  
deserve to be there  
highly motivated  
bright, smart, quick, good  
road paved with good intentions  
we assure it is best for students  
hellish consequences  
highest dropout rates  
lower aspirations  
negatively affected  
no positive attitude  
culturally disadvantaged  
low self esteem  
slow, below average, dummies  
sweathogs, yahoos  
vocational

### **No Child Left Behind?**

intelligence  
social construction of reality  
intellectual abilities  
equal footing  
cut and dried  
personal interests and traits  
prediction of future performance?  
political debate  
fatal flaw  
genetic, poverty. Inherently inferior  
national and international tests  
perceived capabilities

Separation  
by race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status  
tracked to develop to their fullest potential  
but unjust barriers?  
equal opportunity?

separate but equal?

defines the experience separating by ability.

privileged,  
low income, minorities.

supporting differences. differentiated curriculums.  
the worst kind of discrimination.

most importantly. Holding us back

## **Race to the Top**

division of students  
constructive unfair  
freedom  
choice predetermined  
voice  
advocation conflict  
guidance  
opportunities restrictions  
teachers  
effective disinterested  
motivation  
expectations discouraged

## **Excellence**

Stepping on the field to score can almost be as  
stressful as walking through campus doors

in my dorm I'm always restin' on the field I'm  
always stressing, leave from class and practices  
and then combine the lesson

sometimes I wake up thinking class is just a living hell the  
field was my church and where I could express myself

started to expand, added music to the plan  
became well rounded and rose up from the stands

this is for you to see you can excel in sports  
and art , and just because your're good at  
sports it doesn't mean you're not as smart

Through the creation of their found poems, students were able to engage critically within the ambiguous space of meaning, finding new possibilities for self, other, and education that exist, even within the space of ideological limitations. Their poetry reflects not only an engagement with the ideas of the text, but is also reflective of their voices of experience coming together as a shared story within the context of each of the poems. Within the messages presented in these poems are key ideas presented from each of the texts students had been asked to read, but also present are echoes of the dialogue that occurred among group members that day. Dialogue that reflects how group members were feeling—tired, anxious, grouchy, inspired, excited and dialog that reflected their own past experiences of alienation and inclusion. Of particular interest is the final poem where students chose to adapt the idea of the found poem, adding their own words to the (re)presentation, several members of this group were athletes and could also be identified as minorities. These students chose to enter into the musicality of the process, inserting their own personal experiences into the poem, in a way becoming agents within the context of their own story. As each group performed their final representations for the class, there was a new energy in the room: perhaps a sense of pride in the reality that they had created something of aesthetic worth; perhaps a greater sense of wholeness and awareness that, through this aesthetic process, they had tapped into—if somewhat uncomfortably—those aspects of self that often remain excluded in the space of the classroom. Or perhaps it was a sense of praxis that arose through the ownership of these works of expression that had something worthwhile to say about the experience of education.

### **(Un)knowing, Desire, and Praxis**

The original event that we wish to retrieve in words cannot be understood independent of the desires that shaped it, nor of the desires and longings through which bodies and landscapes are constituted. (Davies, 2000, p. 40)

Shaken  
we hold on  
    tight  
to aspects of self  
in our speaking  
of wonder  
  
and disdain

we come to know  
the other

(un)like ourselves

Each group's poem was different. Some reflected a clear representation of the big ideas from the assigned reading, while others served more as a representation of oneself—a statement of validation. For instance, the group that wrote the poem, *Excellence*, chose to approach the process quite differently from the rest of the class in that the words they had chosen did not simply come from the reading, but, rather, arose for them as a result of the reading and the experience of the privilege walk. Several of the students in that group were athletes who had been deeply impacted by some of the directions given during the walk. Immediately following the walk, comments were made such as, "That is not fair," "Just because someone is an athlete, does not mean they are not smart." There was a sense of anger in their words as well as a questioning of their own value and how they were perceived by others. The spoken word poem that they had created reflected a need to be recognized as multi-faceted individuals who indeed had worth. While this deviated from the initial directions, students were still engaged in a process of meaning making that interrogated assumptions.

Many of the groups recognized that there are significant contradictions across educational practices, and they sought to identify these contradictions, while other groups simply felt they needed to speak for the silenced. The group who generated the poem *Race to the Top*, have constructed the poem to illustrate contradictions and categorizations, as the students separated the experience(s) of school, choosing to use single words, opposites positioned to reflect one another. Other poems, like *Well Intended Pathways*, highlight how students have been positioned in certain ways as a result of judgment, choosing to include derogatory terminology that disrupts the calm, orderly nature of what many of us perceive to be school. In addition to questioning perception and practice, poems like *No Child Left Behind?* and *Separate but Equal?* also demonstrate a desire to interrogate policy. Evident in each of the poems was a level of commitment to questioning—to the act of looking beneath the surface. For instance, in each of the poems, there is evidence of attention to an ideal including word choices like: "road paved with good intentions," "develop their fullest potential," "supported," "freedom," "choice," "rose up"; yet along with those words are those that suggest a challenge or an awareness that perhaps beside the idealized image of education as emancipatory is something darker: "hellish consequences," "holding us back," "disinterested," "hell." Students were no longer simply accepting Truth as singular. Instead, they were beginning to see that truths were different for each person, fluid even within ourselves, that the good and bad could run parallel within the same story and that some truths were better represented than others. They pieced together these emerging insights through word choice, rhythm, spacing that spoke not only as text, but as a form of aesthetic expression that engaged multiple aspects of the learning self. No matter the approach that was taken to create each poem, each group of students was holistically engaged— mind/body/soul in making and communicating meaning.

## Ambiguous Possibility

Perhaps that is what we need to be affirmed, this 'me' that will never be full and is always fuller than we can imagine. Instead, we trap ourselves in the belief that we could somehow avoid the problem of imperfection, gain power over it through the fullness of self, of 'me.' And in so doing, we stop the necessary ethical struggle, the attention to other. And this includes the other 'me' that is in fact yet to come. (Martusewicz, p. 107)

We are  
responsible  
for truths that  
breathe below  
the surface  
We explore  
our stories  
their stories  
making sense in the meantime  
to be present  
to change time  
just remember  
to take it  
slowly

The students enrolled in my Social Foundations of Education course found themselves working within the (un)comfortable space of (im)perfection and praxis, where all of the self—mind/body/soul--must be engaged to make sense of truth(s) that exist both above and beneath the surface. Using an aesthetic epistemology that drew on poetry, students were engaged in an inquiry process that was holistic in nature. Reflecting the nature of currere, they began with the autobiographical to explore, communicate, and make meaning, arriving at new understandings of the experiences of others while also (re)engaging with what remained (un)spoken within their own personal experiences of schooling. For students who had known success, this work was disruptive in that it required a (re)examination of both self and other, while questioning the subjective qualities and truths of those situations that had positioned them as successful. However this reexamination often created opportunities for students to better know themselves and their peers.

i really appreciated having the chance to convey my ideas and thoughts about education and myself in a format other than typical school assignments. it really helped me become aware of how i can use poetry just as effectively in my academics, as well as to help me connect better with my peers. however, i am most appreciative on how the poems i wrote helped me want to develop and pursue this skill throughout the rest of my time at this university, and i thank you for giving me the opportunity to do so. (Devonne, Personal Communication, October 2010)

While this reflection provides more evidence of the personal experience and possibilities in relationship to pedagogy, expression and knowledge, the integration of poetry also created the space for public opportunities for praxis. Drawing on poetry as a means to inquire and interrogate those structures and practices that may have worked for them, allowed students to operate with/in ambiguity—and it was this ambiguity that created a safe space of interrogation and possibility that might begin in the classroom, but move outward as students engaged in the world.

Poetry is about the mind, the body and soul, joining together in the active process of engaging and making meaning. Through poetry, students were able to both enter into and step outside of experience in a manner that was communal, offering an opportunity for a dialogue that engaged not only the mind, but the senses, and the emotional—words were drawn from texts, bodies bent or moved about in creation, as feelings were expressed or experienced, through body/mind/spirit . This indeed is praxis as students actively make and interrogate meaning, while creating new possibilities for truths across a landscape of contradictions. Having started the semester with a view of education as a single facet with a common purpose, students began to recognize that truth(s) and possibly(s) within the field, as well as epistemologies were multiple, temporal, and reflective of the experience and position of an individual. Poetry allowed students the opportunity to move outside the answer toward a space of living inquiry, where one became presently engaged within experience. They were learning about themselves, the world, and their peers.

One aspect of doing the arts-based activities was that we were able to have the chance to express what we had learned in a very different way from what I am used to. I am a management major therefore although it was at times a struggle do do these assignments (since I am not the best artist), I felt I was able to get out of my comfort zone a little bit and do something new. More importantly, seeing how some students excelled in these assignments when they were shared, made me realize and appreciate how true it is that everyone learns differently. Not everyone does best by being tested or writing papers and while I believe those are skills individuals should develop as well, it was nice to be able to express my self in a new way. (Kristy, Personal Communication, October 2010)

As they began to look at educational practice and possibility with a fresh and critical eye, they were also beginning to recognize that knowledge is diverse, both in nature and expression—that it cannot be fixed, nor can change be concrete and final. Students became more comfortable with ambiguity, while also finding a vehicle to know and communicate within that ambiguity, becoming agents of change both within themselves and the world. This change was evident in the words and actions of many students.

I thought all the art-based activities were really helpful. It really helped me understand a lot of concepts and allowed me to really open my eyes. Working in group activities not only let me share my voice but made me aware of a lot of



different opinions I never even thought about. (Sean, Personal Communication, October 2010)

Learning is a spiritual process and the opportunities are infinite if we work to unfold pedagogies that engage mind/body/soul, embracing the holistic nature of knowing. Poetry can be a powerful epistemological tool, engaging the aesthetic qualities of language to reflect experience, a reflection that embodies many truths both within the interpretation as well as the creation. However, as the wise Swami Satchinananda once said, "Truth is one, paths are many." The important element, the Truth, is that experience and understanding, like the self, are multi-faceted and fluid, they engage all aspects of one's being. There are many ways one might bring students into a space of critical and embodied engagement with meaning and possibility. As educators, we must ask ourselves how do we engage the whole being, mind/body, soul on this journey toward (un)knowing? The process does not happen quickly nor is it final, it is simply a process as we and our students will continue to grow, be(come), discover, and reflect, honoring human possibility and the ambiguity of life.

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