Reflection Paper #2

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I am a different person than the one who entered our classroom on August 26, 2009. This social justice course has washed windows in my mind that were open, yet covered with a fog that distorted the view. I frequently reflect how fortunate I am to have the opportunity, at this point in my life, to be able to reconstruct my identity and my understanding of others. What has occurred over the past few months to begin this process of change? While the many class readings provided a majority of resources to fuel my thinking, what has made the biggest impact on broadening my thinking, feeling, and perspectives are the people I have come to know.

My journey began with an autoethnography. An autoethnography is a genre of writing and research that connects the personal to the culture and, along with the intersectionality of identities, shares the goal of social change through the creation of evocative stories (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The autoethnography exercise was a powerful vehicle for each person to share the intersectionality of his or her identity. As I listened to the stories of my class, I realized that there were few people who shared a background similar to mine. Our class was comprised of a tapestry woven with varying threads of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and socio economic status. I had never been in a room with so many people different from myself. I knew, at that point, that I had a lot to learn and change was on the horizon.

I have begun to learn about race. I recognize my membership in a dominant group and the oppression caused to those outside of my group (Goodman, 2001). From participating in the class gender activity, I saw that being a member of a privileged group can cause others to react to me in ways that are driven by experiences of oppression.
This lesson was more powerful than any reading could ever have been. It created the dissonance necessary to self-author new meaning (Baxter-Magolda, 1999). In order to understand the situation, I was driven to read and process the perspective of others. The key for me is that I did this because I cared. I cared because the situation involved someone I had come to know and respect through the autoethnography and shared class dialogue that generated critical thinking (Freire, 1970). Johnson (2006) has helped me begin to understand the social construction of race and the dynamics of power, privilege and oppression that social systems reinforce. His book has encouraged me to examine my race, the systems in which I play a role, and to reflect on what change I can author on a personal level.

I have learned much about the GLBT population. I went to college in the 1970’s when homosexuality was listed in the DSM as a disorder or illness. I had no gay friends. As a heterosexual female with a family, my life path did not cross those of the GLBT world. Now at a crossroads in my life, I have developed many opportunities to intersect and come to know individuals who identify as queer or bisexual or transgender. They are warm, loving, compassionate individuals for whom I would go to the ends of the earth.

While the readings helped me to see the oppression individuals in this group face such as biphobia (Diehl and Ochs, 2000); and homophobia (Blumenfeld, 2000; Pharr, 1997), it is the bonds that I am forming with real people that will drive my advocacy. The Gay-Straight Panel, especially, made a lasting impression. To hear the lived experiences of the panel and for them to have the courage to share what they have been through was profoundly moving. Again, this is something that could not be captured in print. It was dissonance created by listening to the internal and external struggles they were forced to
endure in their youth that promoted my self authorship (Baxter-Magolda, 1999) of a new understanding of and compassion for queerness in young people.

I have learned much about socioeconomic status, and its affect on the cultural competencies that young people bring to college (Borrego, 2007). This was learned from the readings, but also from observing others around me and how they make due with limited resources. Much dissonance was created for me on this topic by the realization that I have contributed to an incomplete education for young children based on my incomplete knowledge of the socioeconomic history of marginalized groups. Opportunities that were provided to white settlers long ago and veterans after the great wars to accumulate assets and wealth were denied to others. (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). I teach the history I was taught, but I have come to know that it only reflects the history of the dominant group in power, not the oppressed. With this realization came sadness and guilt, but also the desire to advocate for the truth in education. I can do this by teaching students to be critical thinkers and question beyond the information provided in textbooks written and edited by those in power.

And I have learned much about gender and how it fragments (Lorber, 2000). I was conditioned by the social system that I grew up in and never thought about gender. It just was. I was privileged to experience an amazing example of undoing gender recently at the Michigan - Penn State football game in Ann Arbor. When Michigan’s band entered the field for the pregame performance, one of the majorettes, Nathan, was announced. Nathan was a guy, and he was an awesome twirler. My understanding of what it must have taken Nathan to get to the point where he had the courage to embrace his identity and to be able to go on the field in front of the entire student body came from
the readings and experiences I have encountered in class. I was proud to be able to
realize how special Nathan was. My biggest growth in the area of gender; however, is
my developing understanding of the transgender population. I am now aware of the issues
that this population faces with dignity, grace and humility. (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis and
Tubbs, 2005). I know that I now have the voice to advocate for others when people who
have little understanding of them attempt to disparage their identity. I believe this
because, for me, the word transgender now has a face.

It is the person to person contact with others who are different from me that has
cleared the fog in my mind and heart and has initiated the reflection that is leading to
change. I commend the selection team for the Student Affairs Graduate Program for
matriculating a diverse group that germinates the environment for opportunities for self-
authorship and meaning making. I would gather this is by design and not coincidence. It
is what really drives the learning. The book learning provides numerous illustrations of
the need for social justice. The content is static, controlled, and provides the opportunity
to build theory. The voices of many others are heard through print. But for me,
understanding how I have learned is far greater, for it has lit the fire inside to burn
brightly as an advocate. Forming friendships with people from different walks of life has
inspired me to help others to see the beauty in the human tapestry.

Social justice strives for full and equal participation for all groups, where
resources are equally distributed and everyone is physically and psychologically safe.
(Bell, 1997; Broido, 2000). As an ally/advocate I must be committed to action that
changes the culture that maintains the social inequality (Goodman, 2001). I have always
had an appreciation of differences. But the differences that I have had the fortune to
encounter were limited in scope and depth. My knowledge of diversity was limited due to a lack of exposure which created an unintentional ignorance of many key social justice theories and perspectives. But, as I have learned, ignorance is not an excuse. My horizons have been broadened. I will take back to Bucks County rich experiences and a greater understanding of how the homogenized population I live and work in contributes to a system that creates oppression. I will do my part; however small, to create positive change.

I can do this by trying to lessen my coworkers’ ignorance about social justice. I would like to change our learning environment to be more accepting of students with varying ethnicities. I hope to challenge teachers to examine their race and how it affects their interactions with and expectations for students of color or who speak a language other than English. Creating a book club and discussion groups to read about social justice issues would be a start to change attitudes: attitudes that would build an environment to fit all students and reject changing students to fit the environment.

I have come to construct my own definition of social justice. For me, social justice requires owning a respect and an appreciation of differences, and while recognizing difference, also understanding that we are all the same. We are all entitled to the same rights and opportunities and must commit to challenge the systems that deny this. I have learned this from the readings and the faces of my new friends who humanize theory through the voices of their lived experiences.
References


