Making Connections with Your Students

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University of California Los Angeles: Cultural Perspectives

May 29th 2024

I will share a personal anecdote from my college days in Egypt. In one of my English Literature lectures, my professor paused at a quote from Mr. Earnshaw's description of Heathcliff in Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*. Earnshaw brings home a young Heathcliff, whom the narrator characterizes as a wild “gypsy” and a devil. Yet Earnshaw introduced him as a “gift from God” to his wife and children. My professor explained that a gift, like a young child, holds potential. It can be nurtured to bring joy or mistreated, leading to misery and destruction. It all depends on how society treats it. Heathcliff endured cruelty in his early years, which turned him into a heartless and vengeful man later in the novel. Not all people can confront the racism, prejudice, and biases that define a society, as Heathcliff’s fictional narrative shows. However, there are also extraordinary people like Steve Pemberton who look at the difficulties they faced and can identify those who, in seemingly small acts, have helped him become the inspirational person he is today.

In his speech, Steve Pemberton recounted his childhood story when people seemed to give up on him and labeled him “ugly, dumb, undeserved, and broken.” He, therefore, cautioned his audience about attempting to define anyone because it could break them. In his mind, all it took for him to become the great man he is today was a small act of kindness, “a small interaction.” One powerful anecdote he describes involves a stranger, Mrs. Levin, who saw a young boy reading a book and decided to bring him boxes of books frequently. This gradually led Pemberton to the path of education. Mrs. Levin was unaware of her impact on Steve and how she changed his life forever.

As teachers, we are obligated to make a difference, encourage our students to learn, to develop a thirst for knowledge and a desire to explore the world. We start by building relationships with our students, using their names to personalize them and show our care. Pemberton felt he mattered when he was referred to by his name as a child. Being able to acknowledge a student’s individual and collective identity increases the chances of a teacher becoming profoundly impactful on their students’ lives. Creating activities like cultural collages helps teachers get to know their students and allows students to show their cultural backgrounds, interests, hobbies, and faiths. Teachers who share their own experiences make themselves approachable and build a connection with their students. We must also be available and approachable if they have questions or need our listening ears. We can identify their funds of knowledge by using surveys, questionnaires, or interviews. In addition, these surveys can help us tailor our lessons and activities to their individual needs.

Icebreakers are essential for getting to know my students. I handed out blank sheets of paper to each student and told them to draw some things about themselves, such as their hobbies, favorite foods, stories, movies, games, and something related to their country. They were allowed to use colors if they needed. After they finished, we all took turns guessing their countries and interests. The students were enthusiastic about the activity, and we enjoyed guessing their nationalities and hobbies. Some students were eager to share more and answer questions. I also took part in this activity and discussed my own personal identity. Icebreakers encourage collaboration and create a sense of community in the classroom.

Student-led discussions or projects empower students and give them ownership of their learning. I decided the ESL project would be about writing a short story of their choice on a poster board. Students can find pictures online or draw them to describe key moments in their stories. Some wrote stories that mirrored their own experiences or fulfilled dreams. For example, a Muslim student wrote the story of a student who journeyed through time to witness herself as a doctor working in a hospital. She did not tell me that it was about her. She printed out animated pictures of a young girl wearing a hijab to represent herself. The student’s pride in her work and sense of accomplishment were evident as she showed her project to her parents during the open house. This experience highlights the impact of sharing a story. While I have not witnessed any of those activities changing “the arc of [their] life,” as Steve Pemberton calls it, I agree it is our collective responsibility to try. I do hope that their educational experience can create a positive ripple effect. Maybe someday, one of my former students will try to track me down to talk about all of their accomplishments.

References

Pemberton, S. (2014, March 19). *Steve Pemberton - 2014 NAIS Annual Conference General Session*. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/oyyXME4kwQ4?si=3ORRzbVswJHZjXCr>