Disruptions of the Self-Narrative

Musings on Teaching Social Justice Topics in a Research Methods Course

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Introduction

When I assigned a book with the word *queer* in the title to my Research Methods in Education class last spring, I suspected some of the students would have a negative reaction when they saw the book title on the syllabus. My ostensible reason for assigning the book was to provide an example of the kind of in-depth insight into people's experiences that you can get through well-conducted qualitative interviews. The other purpose, of course, was to increase my students' awareness of the oppression experienced by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT)[1] youth, though GLBT issues were not listed as a course topic and did not fit with any of the course objectives.

As I read my students' posts about the book on the blackboard discussion board, and the posts were somewhat more positive than I had expected, I wondered whether the incidental appearance of the social justice-related information might have promoted a greater willingness on the part of the students to consider new perspectives. In other words, it got me thinking about the question of whether there is any sort of pedagogical advantage to introducing social justice issues as if you aren't really intending to teach students about them.

I thus carried out a small investigation into my own teaching experience in that course during that semester, leading ultimately to a change in my own informal theory of student learning and student resistance. Hence these musings, which focus on self-narrative—my students' and my own.

Context

I'm a female professor at a mid-size public university. I'm White, and I identify

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as bisexual or questioning, but that identification is relatively recent, and I've lived as a heterosexual my entire life and have been married to a man for 20 years.

In my master's level research methods classes, I've always assigned articles related to race and gender issues. The reason I began to reflect more carefully on the use of these social justice-related readings during Spring 2010 is that I taught two sections of the course online. In general the classes, my first online teaching experiences, went poorly, for a whole variety of reasons beyond the scope of this article.

However, one positive aspect of the experience was the online discussion. I'd previously used Blackboard discussion to supplement face-to-face classes, but the amount of required online discussion in these fully online classes led to a more complete view of student thinking than I had seen in the past with comparable sized classes. Hence reactions of all students to the reading were more visible to me and much more permanent than usual.

That Spring 2010 semester was also the first time I had used the book about GLBT teen experiences. The book is called *In Your Face: Stories from the Lives of Queer Youth*, by Mary Gray (1999). It contains excerpts from interviews with 15 gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, divided into chapters dealing with different aspects of their lives, such as figuring out they were gay, coming out to family, school experiences, and experiences with religion. Each chapter contains an account by each of the teens regarding the issue in question, and my students were required to read a few specific chapters of the book each week for five weeks.

While it's not unusual for a teacher education program to infuse social justice issues throughout the curriculum, it's not the norm at my institution. Some graduate level teacher education students receive virtually no socio-cultural foundations and others take one class devoted to the

topic. Students at the institution are predominantly White, with many coming from rural Midwestern towns. The bulk of the students in each of my spring 2010 classes (15 or so students out of 21 or 22) were from off-campus cohorts of students majoring in elementary education, and almost all were public school teachers. The non-cohort students in each class were majors in educational administration, special education, instructional technology, and educational foundations. Two students in each class were African American, and the rest were White.

The course covered basic qualitative research methods, including qualitative approaches, data collection, and data analysis. It also included some additional research concepts useful for educators, including correlation, assessment, and basic standardized test score interpretation. In addition to the *In Your Face* book, students read chapters from a text on qualitative methods as well as several research articles. In the first class, the students were required to write a literature review and a research proposal, and in the second class, because the cohort had different needs, a small qualitative research study replaced the proposal.

A major part of the course was the online discussion. I required students to do at least five postings each week, including at least one reflective post per reading. Reflective posts were supposed to respond to both of the following questions: (1) what is the most significant thing you have learned from the reading? And (2) what is the most confusing point in the reading? The classes were only eight weeks long, and they had reading assignments in the *In Your Face* book (along with other readings) during five of those weeks. The students commented on a few different readings each week, but during the five weeks that they were reading *In Your Face* postings about that book made up a large portion of the online discussion.

I did not participate in the online discussion, because I worried that threads might end when the instructor jumped in, and I wanted students to answer each other's questions. I graded their discussion contributions weekly, based on the extent to which they were substantive and reflective, and I also provided a handout at the beginning of each week in which I responded to issues that had come up but not been resolved in the previous week's discussion, including answering questions that had not been answered by other students. Some of the issues addressed in the handouts were about research methods, but some were about GLBT issues, since students wrote quite a bit about those issues.

Understanding Student Resistance

Student resistance to controversial course content is common in foundations of education, and higher education instructors often spend time trying to figure out how to minimize it. Kumashiro (2004) and Luhmann (1998) both argue that as instructors we are frequently less successful at this endeavor than we should be, because even if at one level we know that the transmission model of teaching does not work, we still, far too often, act as if it does.

Thus in dealing with controversial and non-controversial topics, we often have a curricular obsession with using the right teaching strategies and presenting the information in the correct order (Luhmann, 1998). Our tendency, says Luhmann, is to treat the problem as if ignorance is the obstacle, and to therefore provide positive representations as a solution to the students' ignorance. This approach ignores the fact that marginalization is a part of Western culture, such that we have a social-psychological need to have insiders and outsiders.

Rather than thinking about how to present the information, we need to think about "What does being taught, what does knowledge do to students?" (Luhmann, p.148). Ignorance, in this view, is not a lack of information, it's "a form of psychic resistance, a desire not to know" (p. 149). Instead of thinking about sequencing and teaching strategies, to be successful we need to think about how the learning conditions interact with the identity and psychological condition of the student.

In Luhmann's words: "How do identifications become possible, what prevents them, and ultimately, makes learning (im)possible?" (p. 149). Britzman (1998) takes the need to think about what knowledge does to a person's sense of self and to their identity one step further, in her psychoanalytic description of how the ego's job is to reconcile the external world with our psyche. Because the ego is fragile, it tends to protect itself by changing knowledge, which it does using substitutions and reversals. Making rational arguments is useless "because the defenses at work are built on anxiety and ignorance" (p. 326). This makes teaching very difficult.

Another way of thinking about psychic resistance to knowledge is that people are attracted to good stories (Coles, 1989), and our selves, our identities, are really just stories we tell about ourselves. As Ricoeur (1985) says:

> Our own existence cannot be separated from the account we can give of ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity…It makes very little difference whether these stories are true or false, fiction as well as verifiable history provides us with an identity. (p. 214)

One of the segments in a *This American Life* audio podcast that I listened to shortly after teaching the classes spoke to this issue (Chicago Public Radio, 2010). The economics journalist narrator, Adam Davidson, was amazed that the Wall Street bankers he regularly spoke to perceived Obama, who had just bailed out the banking industry, as their enemy.

The factual evidence that Davidson had collected and studied clearly indicated that these bankers would be out of work if the Obama government had not saved them. Yet interviewing a group of such bankers at a bar revealed that the bankers did not think the bailout had anything to do with their current success. Rather, they were absolutely positive that it was their own intelligence, specifically the fact that they were far smarter than other people, that had led to their current success.

Davidson concluded that the bankers need to justify to themselves how rich they are, and the best way for them to do that is to create a protective self-narrative that places the cause of their wealth in their own ability to make the smartest risky investments. Information that violates their self-narrative is not heard—their "fragile egos" will not allow it.

Although our self-narratives are difficult to break out of, and although we use multiple defenses to prevent learning of new knowledge that is inconsistent with them, it can happen. Bochner (1997) provides a compelling story of how the death of his father made clear to him the weaknesses in the narrative he had created concerning himself, his family, and his academic life. His father's death cracked the narrative, by showing him that he could not and should not completely separate his academic self from his ordinary self. Thus a particular type of experience can cause one to alter and rethink one's narrative of self.

So in summary, although it is possible for one's self-narrative to be altered, it's very difficult. Thus when teaching controversial topics, instructors need to recognize that providing facts and logical rationales is likely to have a very limited impact. As long as the facts are inconsistent with key aspects of our identity, we won't hear them. In the next section of the paper I apply this perspective to my online Research Methods courses from Spring 2010.

Course Knowledge and Student Self-narratives: Analyzing the Online Discussion

Recognizing that a useful way to think about teaching is in terms of what the knowledge does to the identities of my students, and that our identities are composed of the stories we tell about ourselves, arms me with a new means of thinking about teaching. If this is true, then analyzing student acceptance and resistance to instruction on the basis of the extent to which knowledge does and does not fit within their narratives of self would be helpful.

The implication may be that when information is interesting enough that students pay attention, then perhaps learning can occur as long as the new knowledge somehow fits into their self-story, and does not disrupt their self-narratives. Further, although this dynamic might be the general rule, disruptions of the self-narrative would be possible given certain conditions.

In this section of the article I use this framework as a lens for looking at some of the ways my students' online discussion posts in one of the online class sections from Spring 2010 demonstrated resistance, or a lack thereof. These examples are highly speculative, because I don't have in-depth information about my students' identities, and because responses written to comply with graded course requirements and in full view of classmates who are strangers, friends, and peers, obviously need to be interpreted with caution. I applied for and received Institutional Review Board permission to anonymously use the students' posts in this article.

When I read the students' posts for the

first time, while teaching the class, I was surprised and relieved by how empathetic most of my students were in regards to the testimony of the GLB teens in the early chapters of the *In Your Face* book. For example:

Jean[2]: I was surprised at the various ages that these children started having homosexual and/or bisexual tendencies. It seemed like the first obstacle for them was actually admitting these feelings to themselves instead of denying them. It did not help that they were also getting called names such as: fag, queer, homo, gay, etc. This chapter helped me better understand these relationships a little bit more. I feel sorry for these teens and the inner struggles they have to deal with in coming to terms with their sexuality.

Then, partly because of that early empathy, I was surprised at the negative reaction of several of my students to one of the later chapters. In rereading the online discussion through my new informal theoretical lens, I see how these reactions fit into an interpretation that links the responses to interactions between the knowledge and student self-narratives.

Specifically, the early chapters of the book describe the GLB teens' experiences coming out to themselves and their families as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. In many of these cases, this description involved the families' difficulties accepting the information, as well as descriptions of the problems this lack of acceptance caused for the teenagers.

For many of my students, empathizing with the teens likely fit well into a parent-as-negligent/uncaring/irresponsible narrative that appears to have been a salient part of many of their teacher identities. Negative attitudes of teachers towards parents is a common phenomenon in the U.S. (See, for example: Ferrara, 2009; Flanigan, 2007; Harry, Klingner, & Hart, 2005; Orosco & Klingner, 2010.) In the online discussion of my class the anti-parent narrative clearly came through in some of the discussions related to articles about schools and schooling. Here is one example:

Amber: … I know when I have parent/teacher conferences I will be seeing the parents of the kids who are performing well, and really their parents don't need to come, but do because they value their child's education. The parents of the D and F students never show up. Is there a correlation…I think so…some households are so dysfunctional that school doesn't matter and it is the last thing that parents even think about, except as a babysitter…sad.

In the above post and in most of the posts related to parents the anti-parent narrative is focused primarily on low-income parents. The *In Your Face* book does not provide much information about the teens' income levels. However, I speculate that the self-destructive behavior that some of the GLB teens described, combined with descriptions of how hard it was for them to deal with parental non-acceptance of their sexual orientation, was close enough to the neglected child/bad parent narrative that defines an important part of the professional existence of many of my students, such that it was easily accepted.

Obviously the anti-parent narrative is problematic; however, it may have provided a space through which one of the books' main messages—the very difficult time GLBT students have—could be heard and learned by my students. The following excerpt from a post by Pamela is one example:

Pamela: As I read this chapter it was so heartbreaking to hear what some of these teens had to endure just to come out to their parents! Granted some already knew and accepted it but the ones who didn't, it was terrible. Some of the teens began cutting, taking pills, and even attempted suicide!! … How can you not accept your own child?

Since in general my students seemed quite empathetic with the teens' stories for the first few chapters, I was initially surprised by the negativity that appeared in several students' posts in Week 5, as they responded to a chapter describing the teens' experiences in school. Analyzed in terms of the impact of knowledge on self-narrative, however, I now speculate that it may have been relatively easy for most of my students to be empathetic when the enemy was parents, but much harder when the enemy was school itself:

Karen: Do teachers foster this antagonistic environment? NO! I think that teachers can do the best they can to stop any sort of harassment. All teachers can do is let you know they are there for support and help you when you are in trouble. But teachers are not psychic. Sometimes I think the general public views teachers as these superhero-type characters with capes and powers beyond human capabilities. I feel for the young people's struggles in this chapter, but I like to think that it is more accepted now to be homosexual—and high school may just be a refuge for some of these individuals.

The teacher who posted the above response seems to have been unable to accept the idea that high school was a difficult environment for the GLB teens because such information is too inconsistent with her teacher self-story. The teacher's identity, which contains an important benevolent teacher component, may be too threatened by information/knowledge supporting a school-as-dangerous narrative.

While this last issue seemed to be the source of resistance for some of my students, other student responses appear to indicate that resistance to the negativity of the teens and of Gray towards school may stem more from conflict between their own teenage high school narrative and the ones portrayed by the gay and lesbian teens. In this scenario, accepting the teens' stories would mean giving up aspects of their own teenage stories, or admitting that their own teenage stories are limited or flawed.

Here is an example of a post that seems to support such an interpretation, though interestingly the student shows an increase in understanding at the end:

Ann: I get what the author is trying to say, but what if this is how I want high school to be? Why is this violently antagonistic?? I for one am one who loved high school, got decent grades, met my husband, and went on to be a productive citizen. Why is that wrong??? Why is this lifestyle being judged negatively?? I agree we need to work on how homosexuals are treated in high school, but why condemn the "norm" of over all school? I know the argument could very well be, "whose norm?" My norm may be very different from someone else's norm.

So far I've argued that two characteristics of student responses to the Gray book that had been initially somewhat surprising to me became much less surprising when looked at in terms of interactions between knowledge and individuals' identities.

The posts of one particular student, Dave, provide another interesting illustration of the dynamics of resistance and self-narrative. Dave was one of two students who came out as gay/lesbian in the online discussion during the class. He came out somewhat subtly during Week 3, which is the week students began reading the Gray book:

The main focus of chapter 2 was about dealing with the process of telling people about their sexuality. I've found that if you act [like a] stereotypical gay person, people have a hard time dealing with it. I think because it sticks out so much. Many times people try to cram it in other people's faces. "We're queer were here," thing. Many people will respect you if you are you. I grew up in a town of 3,000 people

and no one cares. I stayed true to who I was and didn't run off and get caught up in the gay culture.

In this initial post we see glimpses of a message that Dave consistently conveyed in posts about the Gray book, which is that being gay is no big deal. Based on his postings, I believe that many would characterize Dave's form of "being gay is easy" self-narrative as a classic case of internalized oppression. From a social justice standpoint one problem with the manifestation of his self-narrative was that his posts displayed a somewhat dismissive attitude toward the GLB teens' stories in the reading; another is that his posts imply that if gay or lesbian individuals have trouble being accepted in society it's their own fault. Here is an example from a Week 5 post:

Chapter 5 focused on religious pressure and the various interactions with religion in the lives of the kids. It's interesting that the focus is on Christianity and how the media has vilified Christianity. I really don't consider myself Christian; I have a respect for all religions. I can get married in a church in any state, you just have to find the right church. Yes, I know it's not really marriage to the eyes of the state, but to me it is, and that is most important. If we stop and look, everyone has a challenge or challenges in life; even a white male. It's up to you to make the best of it and live your life to its fullest…

Dave's "being gay is easy" narrative is pretty consistent until it breaks down at one point during the Week 7 discussion. My interpretation of the break is that one particular event, a specific post/accusation by another student, caused a rupture in his self-narrative. The content of this post was unacceptable to his identity, and expressing that unacceptability forced him to finally admit that being gay was actually hard for him. The post that spurred this admission argued that people are not born gay, but rather choose to be gay. Dave responded:

…being a homosexual is very difficult. If I had the choice, I would much rather be heterosexual, it's much easier…I would much rather live in a small town or in the country and have children…Like I said, your opinion is important. But, why would someone choose to be hated.

As indicated earlier, Dave's general self-narrative appears to that being gay is not actually difficult in society, especially if you just ignore all the people who politically identify as gay. However, unsurprisingly, apparently another part of his self-story is that being gay is something he was

born with, not something he acquired or chose. So when a student challenged that second aspect of his self-story, he felt it was necessary to refute it, and it's in refuting the idea of gayness as choice that a chink in his general self-story appears, because such an accusation made it necessary to admit that being gay is difficult in U.S. society after all.

The student comment, in essence, forced two somewhat conflicting parts of his self-story to come into contact, and so one of them had to go. Earlier I described how Bochner, in a compelling piece about his relationship with his father and his reaction to his father's death, was forced to come to terms with and shift his self-narrative while dealing with the death of his father. While Bochner rethought and changed his identity in a permanent way following his father's death, the rupture in Dave's self-narrative appears to have been very temporary.

Dave's later posts are more consistent with his "being gay is no big deal" self-narrative, as can be seen in excerpts from two later posts that same week:

People don't think of me as a homosexual, they think of me as '[Dave], the guy that likes guys.

Not every kid is going to be treated fairly, but that can be because a child is Muslim, black or isn't wearing the coolest clothes.

My Own Self-Narrative

A sign of my privilege as a White professor is that during this endeavor, initially at least, I worried about my students' psyches, but failed to consider my own. My original question in this investigation, as indicated in the introduction, was whether students might be more receptive to social justice knowledge if it seems as though I'm not really trying to teach it.

The questioning of this question began to percolate in my mind when I presented an initial version of this article at a conference and in her remarks the discussant noted that using a book with the subtitle "Stories from the Lives of Queer Youth" was an odd way to try to subtly or covertly cover GLBT issues. That statement startled and embarrassed me a little, as I realized its logic.

A more vigorous shake-up came a few months later. I was talking to another group of scholars about the article, and one of them said: "What makes you think the students didn't know you were trying to teach them about sexual orientation? How

could you assume that you were slipping that in there unnoticed?" Implied was a question about my assumptions of my students—did I really think that telling them that the purpose of the book was to illustrate interview methods would fool them into believing that I wasn't trying to teach them about GLBT topics? Realizing that the whole premise of this endeavor had been based on a rather delusional self-narrative about teaching was an important chink in my own self-story.

The other more obvious way in which my teaching self-narrative has shifted in the process of writing this article is that I have a new theory of my own students' "resistance" to social justice topics. Specifically, I realized that resistance doesn't have to be interpreted as resistance. Taylor (2003), in her use of Bakhtin's notion of appropriation to reinterpret her preservice teacher student's close-mindedness toward use of logic and reasoning in math, realized that resistance could just as easily be understood as a struggle to make meaning. Similarly, I found thinking about student self-narrative and identity to be an alternative and more pedagogically useful way of thinking about my own students' apparent failures to learn.

Somewhat ironically, my initial ridiculous self-narrative about deceiving my students might have been helpful in the short-term. My original question in this investigation was whether presenting social justice information as if I'm not trying to teach it leads to less resistance than explicit teaching. Although I was likely mistaken in the notion that I was "tricking" my students, doing what I considered to be an incidental presentation of the information, I may have created more opportunities for students to fit the information into their own narratives.

If I had been more actively trying to provide them with knowledge about GLBT issues, my framing would likely have created fewer openings through which they could fit their stories. So instead of actually deceiving my students, in thinking I was doing an incidental insertion of social justice information, I was likely teaching the content in a more effective manner than I do when I don't consider myself to be deceiving anyone.

So even though I was fooling myself that it was incidental, my thinking that the students didn't perceive me to be trying to teach the social justice topics may have led me to teach it in a more effective way. The online nature of the class may have facilitated this dynamic, since it was easier for

me to stay out of online discussions than it is for me to stay out of face-to-face class discussions, so I avoided refuting students' claims. Such refutations tend to provide knowledge outside of a narrative context, and hence are relatively ineffective.

Another potential irony is that in these particular online classes what may have been better for social justice was not as good for research methods. For a variety of reasons, I was not a successful first-time online teacher of research methods, so my students may have learned more about the supposedly incidental information than about the subject I was supposed to teach.

Definitely quite useful, however, is the new lens that I can now apply to social justice conversations with students (and others). Recently, for example, in class a White student admitted that the notion that everyone is racist was unacceptable to her. I've known for many years that putting people on the defensive tends to be pedagogically ineffective, but applying that knowledge is not always easy for me. Thinking about the effect of that statement on her identity and her self-story made it much easier for me to provide a response that was somewhat challenging yet not overly confrontational.

So instead of resorting immediately to "logic" and "facts" to support my point, I empathized with her, and noted that I understood how difficult it can be to accept the idea of oneself and of people in general as racist. In addition to thinking more carefully about my students' self-narratives in the future, I hope that I have learned to frequently question my own self-narrative, though that's even harder.

Notes

[1] The interviewees in the book include only gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. However, the author briefly discusses transgender youth, and the problematic absence of them from the study, so I am using the common GLBT acronym here.

[2] Student names have been changed.

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