SPOTLIGHT ON UNDERGRADUATE SCHOLARSHIP

The Transformative Nature of Journey in Self-Identity

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Prologue:
Perennial Questing

Since childhood, I have been a traveller. Embracing the land below many different North American skies as my home, I revelled in the balmy Pacific seashores along California's coast, explored a suburban cul-de-sac in Indiana's tornado alley, and learned to adore the vast prairie plains in rural Manitoba. In later years, abandoning habit for the inexperienced – the unknown, the unfamiliar – became more than a means to an end, as the end became impossible to predict. While on a quest for adventure in bella Italia, I discovered a wealth of friendship and the concurrent allure and fear of freedom in linguistic, geographical, and cultural isolation. On a spiritual voyage in Brazil's major cities, I felt the warmth of the globe's precious humanity, basked in the great kindness of strangers, and rediscovered the joy of existential connection. And although I can not determine whether these memories retained their full truth beneath the glaze of my continuous re-rememberings of them, I still cherish the moments each holds just as I cherish my inanimate travelling companions: the rich tales of others.

I can not count the times I found solace in the stories of friends and family, as well as new friends I came to know through their writing; all of these new stories fractured my emotional and intellectual boundaries to let in the light. I explored the written lives of many fictitious and less than fictitious heroes and heroines, lived within their imaginings of the world, absorbed and shed ideas of myself and my experiences with each new face and turned page. And this is why I am a traveller: not in ode to the conventionally chic that pursue the far corners of the world to satisfy their dusty social media accounts with exotic, envy-evoking photography, but as a fundamental means of being and becoming.

The notion of venturing beyond the self dwells at the heart of education, as highlighted most notably through studying the many voices of history. Exposure to new ideas, beliefs, and physical spaces can create transformational learning, the acquisition of a profound newness that permeates one's entire perception of living and being, and culminate in the similar, nearly destructive metamorphosis of one's community. While initially seeming rare or mythologized, journeying of this nature is an inherent element of the human experience at a fundamental level. The nature, necessity, and consequences of journeying, of travelling through others in physical and psychological space, oftentimes has an untraceable but profound impact on one's discovery of self-identity, sometimes changing, quite literally, everything.

The Role of Journey in Education

Discovering the world through physical or psychological displacement is a concept inherently imbedded in education. Within a discipline structured around empowering youth through their own self-realization and exploration of the world, education and the act of learning offer students gateways through which they can venture, either in person or through the lenses of others, beyond their common realm of existence into new, seemingly impossible realms of opportunity. In her studies of liberal arts, Madeleine Grumet (1998) discussed the concept of education as brand of travel. Arguing the cosmopolitan nature of education, Grumet wrote, "*Educos* means to lead out, to lead away. I have never heard anyone define it as leading us back, back to our families, our neighborhoods, our beginnings" (p. 188). Grumet's words emphasize the inherent connection between education and estrangement of self from familiarity.

This separation, such as by physical removal through travel or [by] psychological displacement through literature, leads to the growth that defines education. Without an enticing, initial "leading out," however, teachers can not expect students to gain new understandings of their world. One of the ways to incorporate healthy exploration into students' daily lives is by integrating the questioning of self into the curriculum.

The importance of the social studies curriculum lies within its ability to expose students to new cultural and historical voices in order to enrich their perception of self and culture, a task that educators can not approach without first developing an understanding of history themselves. As a text that evolves and grows much like the world, the contemporary curriculum aims to guide youth toward a more complete sense of themselves and their reality through figurative journeys through time. Pinar (2004) noted that while these "voices of individuals, even in the distant past" reach pupils through the curriculum, teachers must also "understand the contemporary (and, implied, the future) curriculum" (Network Continuum Education, 2006, p. 989). Although Pinar appealed directly to understanding the curriculum, his message extends beyond the document and into the meanings that it encourages educators to impart to children. In order to lead students into the study of history, educators must possess a concrete, yet evolving, understanding of that subject before attempting to dissect its curriculum. If this curriculum document changes with the culture, however, it too remains an artifact of the past and a shadow of the present, a written record of societal perceptions, values, and meanings. As a historical document, the curriculum is therefore open to interpretation by educators and students alike, a familiar territory wherein both can begin to explore distant and present realities. Understanding elements of contemporary history, such as those contained in the curriculum, illuminates more distant histories, sparking the imagination and initiating the journey through one's physical space and time. Through exposure to the voices of others, students develop empathy for their tales, absorb elements of their reality, and live a new experience of life as a result. Bridging the divide between old and contemporary histories, however, is far from a simple, painless task.

Learning in Community

Far from ordinary, the acquisition and remaking of meaning – as in the case of understanding history – requires an estrangement from previously upheld conceptualizations and a re-understanding of the present time, ideally sparking an expanded understanding of everyday experiences. Studying the acquisition of knowledge and the school curriculum, Matruglio, Maton, and Martin (2013) revealed the importance of enabling youth to re-contextualize knowledge through context-dependence and condensation of meaning. Throughout the learning process, students experience other cultures through their pre-determined understandings of their modern world, which ultimately supersedes any new perceptions of time, for better or worse.

> [This] movement from the representation of more familiar and directly experienced stretches of time to larger historically labelled stretches suggests that successful learning of the discourse of History is partly a process of shedding *personally oriented construals of time* and expanding a more *publically oriented 'technology' of time.* (Matruglio et al., p. 40, emphasis added)

Thus, by their very act of learning, students abandon a sense of self in exchange for a more "out-of-body," community-minded perception of the world – both previous and present time – and of their experiences, even if the aforementioned community's voices are distant and foreign in time and space. While ruptures of this sort occur semi-regularly in classrooms, thereby threatening to render them mundane, the significance of these moments of intellectual awakening makes them extraordinary. Students must experience discomfort through their

remaking of meaning: the assimilation of information into their sense of identity is a difficult, taxing, unpleasant, and almost unnatural task, but also absolutely necessary for growth. Without this detachment, students would remain isolated, separated from their larger contemporary society as well as from the distant historical societies that greatly molded their perceived present reality.

To connect abstract, faraway voices and places to present realities, students require community in order to absorb and assimilate these living histories into their sense of self. Much like Matruglio et al. (2013), Grumet (2009) also believed in the detachment of self as necessary for exploring what is foreign. Reflecting on the curriculum and Greek practices, Grumet clarified the historical prevalence of journeying in pursuit of knowledge for self and community:

> The *theoros* was an ambassador who traveled to another community to witness its rituals and spectacles, and then returned home to report his findings. What the *theoros* observed was the performance of another community's understanding of its everyday life and its relationship to sacred truth . . . transforming the *theoros*. (p. 223)

The acquired information is both distant and intimate, because it deeply connects the subject and object, paralleling the profound inner transformation that students experience in similar intellectual pursuits of knowledge through experience. Much like the *theoros*, students are appointed by their communities as vessels worthy of knowledge, betterment, and empowerment – as the proceeding generation capable of reconstructing, rejuvenating, and re-inspiring their community and their world through their own transformation. The enormity of this task requires even greater care and sacrifice when the pupils return to their communities for the learning process to be complete.

Returning to community in the act of (and following the moment of) knowledge acquisition is essential to the learning process, culminating in the learner's expanded self-identity. As students venture through other societies' sacred realities and integrate this knowledge in their being through the act of learning, just as the *theoros* did, they return to their communities to share their enlightenment, either intentionally or accidentally and unconsciously. Just as students view the other through their own societally crafted gaze, so must they intellectually reflect on their experiences through exposure to their homeland – both through physical travel and internal reflection. This movement not only grounds their understanding in reality but also extends the call of knowing to others. The essential outward expression of inward growth demonstrates the contagious aspect of learning: the community's involvement in the development of youth through learning and welcoming them upon their return, and the necessity of returning to this same community for the process of education to be complete. Pinar (1992) reflected that teachers frequently glimpse –

> the notion that intelligence and learning can lead to other worlds, not just the successful exploitation of this one. . . . Rather, knowledge and intelligence as free exploration become wings by which we take flight, visit other worlds, returning to this one to call others to futures more life affirmative than the world we inhabit now. (p. 234)

Without the final return of journeyers to homeland, the full knowledge that they have gained can not come to fruition, as their new insights must modify their perceptions of the "old world" to a point of near destruction, thus accomplishing the sometimes painful but always rewarding transformation required in learning.

Journeying as the Human Experience

Visiting foreign locations and people profoundly alters students' understandings of their global community and senses of self, reinforcing the importance of abandoning the familiar in understanding humanity. The very essence of travel is a critically important experience for learners, a truth asserted by Pinar (1992) and Grumet (2009), and a physical reality that Greenberg (2008) discovered through his cosmopolitan ventures with his students. While struggling to combat the intellectual and emotional resistance that students demonstrate when they theoretically and empirically study global issues, such as economic underdevelopment and its social impacts, Greenberg found that one of the stumbling blocks to student understanding is their own privilege and their inability to remove themselves from their present state of being in order to enter into the life of another. While "the very situation of global privilege that is a consequence of First World/Third World inequality can be a barrier to teaching concepts of global citizenship, social change, and under-development" (Greenberg, p. 284), the very identification of this issue also poses a solution to teaching similar controversial and otherwise inaccessible concepts across the curriculum. To broaden his students' understanding and help others, Greenberg embraced "the pedagogy of travel/service learning that can effectively teach concepts of world citizenship, economic development, and social change" (p. 299), finding that students not only desired to contribute to social change for the betterment of others but also –

> Dialectically, they comprehend that Latin poor are brethren in spite of differences of language, culture, nation, and social circumstance. They grasp the concept of universal brotherhood and the ethical notions that, just as people are responsible for other people, peoples are responsible for other peoples. Student participants declare that their values have changed in discovering that in poor societies, the value structure is focused on love, family, and friendship rather than material things. Finally, in changing their aspirations to continue participating in internationalist voluntarism, they demonstrate mastery of concepts of world citizenship. (p. 300)

Moments when students began living within the lives of others and exploring manners of thinking and being that were inherently different from their own resulted in an altered perception of what it means to be human in the world. Aside from the fact that leading students to an understanding of global citizenship remains an essential outcome in the Manitoba social studies curriculum, the ability to empathize, view one's positive contributions to the world as a reflection of one's innermost self, and live responsibly and compassionately are core attributes of individuals who have vacated a familiar world and self for an alternative vantage point. These students no longer embark on a journey, but actively live the journey, not only for themselves but for others as well.

The very nature of human existence is, at its fundamental core, one of essential, unending journeying, a quest for knowledge of every shade, and remains the substance of our being. In his discussion on the role of journeying in learning, Smith (1999) described journeying as an execution of daily work, a central aspect of the human experience, the sole method of constructing individual humanity. These moments of travel are a frequent, necessary, and often unperceived involvement with ideas, beliefs, and physical spheres that are "other" to one's daily existence. They enable the traveller to fully comprehend and live more wholly within life's banalities. The very action of leaving behind preconceptions renders "oneself available, individually or collectively, for deeper insight into what the present moment holds" (Smith, p. 4). While superficially normalizing one's own denormalization, Smith's statement implicitly exposes humanity's intrinsic pursuit of novelty, joy, and a definition of self through others both near and far. Smith claimed that the outward journey can not exist without first suffering an inward realization, but the complex nature of the person requires a venture that simultaneously

engages the inward self and the outward world. Journeying is a process that dissects cultural constructs in order to better understand their pathologies while advancing toward genuine freedom to "engage the world openly and without pre-judgement" (Smith, p. 4), and submersion within "the deepest truth of things" by "learning to be at home in a more creative way" (p. 2). The nature of personhood, one propelled by an insatiable desire for purpose and understanding, requires journey, which is simultaneously the very composition of itself.

Conclusion: An Elusive End

Journey is an integral part of learning, a transformational process by which individuals discover a deeper understanding of their world and their own experiences for the betterment of themselves and their community. The process of abandoning familiar territory for the frightening and threatening unknown is part of being human, of struggling to comprehend our environment and those occupying it, of becoming intimately and irrevocably entangled in humanity as we live the continuous process of reinvention, renewal, and rediscovery. The exploration of self – the very core of our identity – is an unachievable axiom, a path untravelled by others but also intimately transformed and created by them. A lifetime of journeying is the only way to live, the only way to be human. The centre of this mystery is precisely where the thrill of pursuit and the bliss in perennial questing thrives.

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