We Are All Teachers and Learners

For the past two years, I’ve been introducing myself in various spaces as both “a teacher and a learner,” mindlessly repeating one of the Intergroup Dialogue Project’s most important mantras without internalizing the message. Yet, during this last semester of college, I’ve been challenging myself to delve more deeply into my work as a student facilitator and education minor. What has come out of this interrogation is a greater appreciation both for the idea that “we are all teachers and learners” and for the education minor and its affiliated programs, including IDP. As an imminent college graduate and future teacher, I am forever indebted to the peers, teachers, professors, and schools that have allowed me to grow as an educator. Out of all the courses and departments with which I have interacted throughout my time at Cornell, I have perhaps learned the most from the education minor. In fact, many of the key insights I will take with me out of college and into the K-12 public education system stem from the idea that “we are all teachers and learners.”

In order to be effective in the classroom, teachers must recognize when expertise in certain areas lies with the students rather than with themselves. Students bring vast bodies of knowledge and experience to the classroom; tapping into these knowledge banks can enrich classroom learning for both the students and the teacher. One area in which students are undoubtedly the experts is with respect to their own personal lives. Students’ personal narratives influence their interactions with other students, their teachers, and the material being taught. By learning these narratives, teachers can better address classroom dynamics and create lessons that leverage students’ interests in order to keep the class engaged.
I first understood the importance of marrying students’ personal narratives and school curricula when I took Dr. Sipple’s course, EDUC 2710: Social and Political Context of U.S. Education, in the fall of 2015. In order to get the class to start thinking critically about the U.S. education system, Dr. Sipple encouraged us to reflect on our own educational experiences in connection to class readings as a part of our weekly assigned “annotations.” Drawing comparisons between my experiences in elementary, middle, and high school and the theory we learned in class allowed me to explore the course material in ways that felt personally relevant to me. I was more engaged and excited by EDUC 2710 than I had been in any of my previous classes at Cornell. Later, as a two-time teaching assistant (TA) for EDUC 2710, I discovered how much material I had retained from when I was a student in the course, largely due to the fact that I had been able to draw relevant comparisons between the course and my personal life. More exciting, however, has been watching my own students make the same rewarding connections between their own lives and the coursework, just as I did as a first-semester sophomore.

I later observed a similar emphasis on students’ personal narratives in the classroom when I visited Vista Grande High School (VGHS) in Taos, NM, as a part of a Cornell research team led by Dr. Duff in the winter of 2015. VGHS mainly serves Latinx and Native students, many of whom are immigrants, the children of immigrants, or residents of Taos Pueblo. I was lucky enough to embed with the ninth grade as they started a semester-long exploration of “borders” – physical borders, language borders, cultural borders, and everything in between. This theme of borders ran through every class, from history class, which focused on the literal U.S.-Mexico border, to Spanish, in which students wrote poems half in English and half in Spanish in order to demonstrate the borders between languages. Discussions of the U.S.-Mexico border hit home for students whose families had emigrated from Mexico; their experiences informed their
participation in class activities as both teachers and learners. As a school, we attended the Native community’s celebration of their version of “Three Kings’ Day.” Students who lived on the reservation helped explain Native customs for those of us who experienced barriers to understanding due to cultural borders; on that day, those students were the teachers and the rest of us were the learners.

What most struck me about VGHS was the teachers’ dedication to engaging with issues and concepts related to their students’ lives. Their commitment led to higher student achievement and engagement overall, because students were more easily able to see both how much their teachers cared about them and how what they were learning was relevant to their lives outside of the classroom. Furthermore, teachers in every discipline, from the humanities to math and the sciences, showed this commitment.

I consider myself lucky in that next year, I will be teaching English, a subject I consider ready-made for crafting curricula that relate to and affirm students’ personal experiences. I’ve already started thinking about the types of literature and assignments that I want to introduce in my classroom in order to better engage my future students. In this area, I know that I will often have to take a step back so my students, as we say in IDP, can take a step up. I look forward to empowering my students to be the expert teachers while I embrace the role of a learner.

Of course, teachers are often the experts in the classroom. One area in which teachers may know more than their students is with respect to the theory behind how students learn best. Educators give a lot of thought to how students intellectually engage with material – are they visual learners or auditory learners, etc.? Understanding how students learn best in a physical sense, however, is just as important as understanding how they learn best in an intellectual sense. I confronted this idea this semester while working in Tara Caiza’s fourth grade class at
Belle Sherman Elementary School. Her classroom is unlike any other I’ve visited. Couches, comfy chairs, cushions, and a giant beanbag rest in place of the typical sets of hard chairs and desks or tables that plague most K-12 classrooms. A table on risers allows students to stand while doing work if they get antsy. A single traditional table and chairs sits next to a whiteboard for students who want to get targeted help from a teacher. Students are free to move from one area to another depending on what they feel they need in order to concentrate on the task at hand. Tara argues that learning where these kids work best at such a young age preempts the type of wasteful experimentation that often occurs once they get to college, when it may take months for students to discover which type of location or study setup works best for them.

Next year, I hope to implement a series of similar changes in my classroom with respect to the way the room is set up. As a future English teacher, I recognize already how uncomfortable it can be to read while sitting in a hard-backed chair, free write at a desk, or do work for extended periods of time while sitting down for the majority of the day. By creating a classroom environment that encourages comfort, experimentation, and movement, I hope to better engage my students. Additionally, by allowing for this experimentation, I hope to afford students more agency with respect to their roles in the classroom. This sense of personal agency is a key factor in my final insight.

*Arguably one of a teacher’s most important jobs is to empower their students to take control of their own learning.* This type of educational empowerment guides students towards assessing their own academic progress and allows both teachers and students to reflect on the course material and how it’s being taught. In *How Learning Works*, authors Ambrose et al. argue that students’ assessment of their own knowledge can serve as a critical diagnostic tool for teachers to discover where their students are lacking in understanding. Teachers can then adjust
future lessons in order to address important gaps in understanding. I recently interviewed at a high school in the Bronx, which predominantly serves students whose native language is not English. For students learning English as a second language (ESL students), gaps in understanding are further compounded by a language barrier that makes it difficult to communicate those gaps to teachers. In the future, then, I hope to normalize student self-assessment and provide alternative methods of communicating those assessments – by using a modified traffic light system, for instance, where green means “I’m good,” yellow means “I need some more help,” blue means “I need help translating something,” and red means “I don’t really understand what’s going on” – in order to better tailor my teaching to the needs of my individual students.

Emphasizing students’ personal narratives, providing students with flexible spaces in which to learn and read, and encouraging students’ metacognitive development ultimately allows students to develop a sense of agency by taking ownership of their own learning. In the end, teaching requires a deep commitment to vulnerability and humility. Reflecting on my own educational experiences, I remember some of the largest barriers to my growth as a learner stemmed from teachers refusing to admit that they were wrong or that there were alternative means of approaching an important concept. In these instances, my teachers refused to embrace their equally important role as learners within their own classroom, thereby eliminating the opportunity for students to feel empowered by becoming the teachers. Next year, I hope to challenge the typical teacher-as-expert and student-as-novice dynamic present in so many K-12 classrooms around the country. I firmly believe that acknowledging and embracing the opportunities for teacher-learner role reversal can make the classroom more enriching and rewarding for everyone.