

A Living Curriculum

Steven Van Zoost

So there I was in India, at the official closing ceremony for *Project Overseas* with the Canadian Teachers' Federation. The minister of education was thanking the volunteer Canadians who had been conducting workshops over the past weeks during the monsoon. In the middle of the minister's address, a senior teacher in the audience interrupted: "I have something to say." Because he was older than the minister, he was permitted to speak his mind and the minister put his speech on hold and sat down. "I have something to say about Mister Steven." Sitting on a raised platform facing the audience, I held my breath, attempting to guise my growing fear of what this man might say. I had gotten to know him well over the past several weeks because he disagreed with almost everything I had presented.

Each afternoon, the Canadian teachers worked with small groups of Indian teachers – a homeroom, if you will. In my homeroom, this senior teacher was eager to discuss classroom management practices. I use the word "discuss" more gently than I should, because I didn't have the feeling that he was all that interested in my point of view about classroom

management. I must admit, I too questioned what on earth I could possibly offer him with my limited experience that was in such dire contrast to his class, which was conducted under a tree. Engagement in debate was inevitable with this teacher. Resistance was futile. And so I spent many humid afternoons entangled in clumsy conversations about "best practices" with this veteran teacher who taught under a tree.

My sanitized life felt out of place in these gritty dialogues about class sizes of hundreds and where bathroom routines were not about raising your hand to ask permission or about walking down the left side of the hall. I need not recount all of the issues that were raised about the differences in classroom management between our Canadian and Indian schools. I think you get the picture – this man had plenty

of opportunity to challenge what I had to say, how I thought, and how I managed [in] my classroom. I worked hard to see him as my advisor, which was difficult to put into practice because he understood that I was there to advise him – a position riveted with generational and cultural challenges.



“One day, I said to Mister Steven, ‘No, Mister Steven. You are wrong!’” he told the audience of teachers including the education minister. For the life of me, I could not recall what moment or even day this was said to me. For all I could remember, that could have been *any* day that we talked. He continued: “If a student ever said that to me – told me that I was wrong – he would not be allowed to come back to school. Do you know what Mister Steven said? He asked me what I thought. I had never considered asking my students what they thought. That is what I learned from Mister Steven.” And with that, he sat down and the minister stood up and continued to deliver his prepared speech.

I did not recall this man’s moment of learning; his “light-bulb moment.” I did not prepare a lesson or even had any intention for this particular learning – a learning that was so significant for this man that he felt compelled to share it with others, even though it meant interrupting the formal closing ceremonies. Perhaps in spite of my workshop preparations and intentions, this man learned from me simply by my response – “What do you think?” I would never have guessed that this simple question would have been of such consequence. It was the first time that I remember acknowledging that we are all a living curriculum. It was the first time that I realized its potential influence.

I don’t mean to speak for you, but I think we are largely unaware of our influence. What continues to seem extraordinary to me is the amount of effort that I spend preparing and planning moments of learning for students in my classroom, when in actuality, moments of learning also occur from our less-planned and more-ordinary interactions.

As someone who is interested in promoting equity in public school education, I often think about how this might best be done. I think of that teacher in India and what he might say to me. I think of the resources that are and are not available to me. I think of how I’d like to move beyond the stories of brave individ-

uals and international days of public recognition. But I don’t think that my students are waiting for me to roll-out a special lesson in diversity. I think my interactions with colleagues in the hall as students change classes are moments when young people are learning from us as a living curriculum. They are seeing that adults with diverse sexual orientations, cultural backgrounds and personal interests not only get along with each other, but enjoy each other’s company and value each other’s professional ideas. While supporting diversity can be thought of in terms of bulletin boards and teaching strategies, our ability to reach students and teachers who feel marginalized can be as simple as our positive professional interactions or common invitational phrases such as, “Good morning” or “What do you think?”

Showing pride in our diversity at school makes sense when we recognize that we are educating all facets of so-

ciety – our future citizens – about tolerance and acceptance. We, as teachers, model what showing pride looks like and sounds like. We, as a living curriculum, teach young people what is acceptable and unacceptable through our own behaviour and language. When young people watch teachers interact with gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-

gendered and two-spirited (GLBTT) staff, students and parents, or see teachers openly acknowledge GLBTT issues, or refer to fiction and non-fiction texts that concern GLBTT characters or people, they are learning from adults about how to discuss, consider, involve, and connect their own lives with the lives of others. They are learning how to support diversity – something they will need to be able to do in their lives beyond school and beyond Nova Scotia. They are learning how they, too, are a living curriculum.

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