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Multicultural Platform of Beliefs Entry 2

In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee’s protagonist, Scout, has a teacher named Miss Gates for the third grade. Gates is only mentioned once in the novel, but Lee includes the character to exhibit a failure of analyzing cultural identity. In Chapter 26, Miss Gates is revealed as a teacher with hypocritical prejudice, who does not always inclusive of rural children in her assignments, and who promotes a dangerously idealized view of the State. Ultimately, Scout realizes these qualities in her teacher, and she wonders how her teacher can hate Hitler for prejudicing the Jews while maintaining a prejudice against African Americans.

Though Scout never gets closure for this dilemma, Howe and Lisi offer an explanation for the phenomena. In the introduction to Chapter 5, the authors write that teachers “must use a regular process for enhancing their awareness of their own cultural identities” (p. 129). From their perspective, a conscious effort of teachers in reflecting on their own situation will result in a higher level of cultural effectiveness in the classroom. The first step in this process is the knowledge of what culture is and where it comes from. The next step is to determine which cultures affected the teachers personally, and how that might be enacted in the classroom. Alongside this, teachers must learn the cultures represented in the community and classroom in which they teach. Lastly, teachers must compare and contrast their own identities with the students and modify their teaching materials and pedagogy to bring learning to the optimal level for the students.

A major factor in this process is the concept of privilege. Howe and Lisi define privilege in terms of “certain people... are imbued with a particular set of privileges that other people are not born with” (p. 107). The analysis of one’s own privilege, in relation to the privileges of the students, will give teachers a distinct advantage in the pursuit of cultural competency. The concept of reflection must occur at every point of the design process for learning. Selection of curriculum, choice in teaching strategies, student-teacher relations in the classroom, and post-lesson reflection must involve the idea of cultural influences on learning.

My cultural identity is rooted in almost every category of privilege the American society affords. With the exception of a slightly lower socioeconomic status than the most privileged demographic in society, I fit into the mold of an “ideal” citizen (as prescribed by the systems that control privilege). I did not always see the overwhelming privilege I was given until a few years ago. Since then, my eyes were opened, and I was no longer “colorblind” as Harper Lee terms it in her novel *Go Set a Watchman*. Upon realizing the full extent of my privilege, I was no longer blind to the disadvantages of others simply based on stigmas embedded in society. Howe and Lisi address the next logical step a person must consider when they say “If we acknowledge that out cultural identities influence how we see the world, then all of us … need to explore in a thoughtful way what it means to be White” (p. 143). The revelation of my whiteness a year ago did indeed force me to make a conscious choice with how to proceed with my life in light of my privilege. Unlike so many others, I chose to dedicate my life to using the privilege handed to me for the direct benefit of the members of society that are not given the same advantages. In this effort, I have to constantly address the concepts of the “white savior” complex which is often patriarchal by actively listening to the voices of the people I wish to serve. When I realized that I was blind to the privileges afforded by one of my cultural identities, quickly became aware of each of my identities and how my blindness could actually infringe on the rights of others.

The messiness of application follows on the end of an epiphany. The terms “white guilt,” “whitesplaining,” and “white savior,” were all developed recently in the wake of a national campaign to raise awareness for the New Jim Crow, but each of these terms can easily be applied across all disadvantaged groups. The three terms above are actually linguistic references to psychological patterns embedded in white culture – the tendency to paternalize and “mission” other cultures. The resultant affect in an unconscious perpetuation of the status quo grounded in majority supremacism. The struggle I have to face when I enter into the classroom is systematically as well as personally not in my favor. While slow but steady changes are being made to reform the system, I can at least push myself to challenge my biases and misconceptions about other cultures by the process described in the textbook: Awareness, Knowledge, Skills, and Action. Currently, I am participating heavily in Awareness by keeping my eyes and mind wide open to new and different perspectives. I participate in Knowledge by surrounding myself with people, resources, and situations that inform or conform my perceptions of other cultures. The purpose of my time at Bloomsburg is to develop Skills in every class by applying my Knowledge to the content. Finally, I participate in Action by involving myself in biweekly trips to Scranton to mentor inner city kids as well as spreading Awareness and transferring Knowledge to friends, family, peers, and faculty.

Despite efforts to reflect on my cultural identity, there are many aspects that I cannot change (e.g. skin color, social mobility, etc.). As I plan to teach in an urban school, much of my cultural makeup will not be directly “relatable” to my students. As a white person, I will most likely not add to the diversity of the students’ teachers, but instead statistically perpetuate the norm. As a straight, able-bodied male, I will also not personally add much diversity. As an older person in a professional career with a network of connections, I will not be able to relate to the students who see their careers as far-off. My Christianity will also place me in contrast to a wider variety of religions and beliefs prevalent in the urban environment. While all of these elements are permanent, I must make conscious efforts to reduce the impact each of these can have on the continuation of a single point of view. As an English teacher, I will encounter different methods of communication from my students as well as be responsible for literature selections. I must emphasize the achievements of my students and celebrate diversity both in and out of the classroom.

Just as Miss Gates in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I have my own perspectives fostered by my cultural identity. However, I choose to recognize and actively combat the aspects that degrade or otherwise devalue the humanity of an individual or the diversity of any culture. In the end, I hope to be successful in my endeavors to transform the lives of students who are not simply afforded access to opportunities as a birthright. And I will achieve this through the constant reflection on my own cultural identity in relation to the cultural identities of my students.