SELF-DEVELOPMENT AS PEDAGOGY IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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This chapter outlines a pedagogy that brings self-development to the forefront of teacher education. The ideas proposed here represent a radically untraditional orientation to the learner, classroom, and curriculum than is evident in most accredited teaching programs in the United States. The premise behind this approach is that teaching and learning reflect the inner condition of both teacher and student. With so much at stake in the preparation of new teachers, it is a wonder more focus is not aimed at supporting the internal phenomena of self-understanding. Content, methods, and skills are, of course, important, but new teachers also need opportunities to encounter their own human potential in the learning process. By facilitating such experiences, teacher educators can model a way of being with students that honors close contact with one’s essential nature. The pedagogy described in this chapter provides a model for future teachers to develop and learn within an emotionally open and loving classroom, a context that invites forth the best qualities in one’s self and each other.

There is a critical need to embrace the significant role for personal development in a holistic pedagogy of teacher education. To do so is to acknowledge that we teach—first and foremost—from within. Through a pedagogy of self-development, course curriculum is framed around the centrality of the whole person relative to theory, subject knowledge, and skills. This approach invokes the emotional and spiritual nature of who we are as whole human beings. These parts of us traditionally stay carefully tucked away and out of sight, especially in a professional and academic context. But college students regularly express pent-up desires to connect within themselves when they have the chance to experience vulnerability in a trusting and safe environment, to be truly seen and heard by others, and to be treated as whole individuals in their learning. The fears, doubts, longings, and life questions of new teachers remain largely unacknowledged. In fact, it is almost as if these aspects of who we are do not exist, at least while we are in school. Yet, the age of many students in undergraduate education courses—between 20 and 24—poses the question of when, if ever, have they had the chance to connect with the qualities that will empower them to teach from within and to bring out the highest learning potential in their students? Ready or not, many will receive their first contract upon graduating. The examples listed below are a few of the common living questions young adults who become teachers ask in our classes. Perhaps you recognize some of them?

Why do I so desperately need affection from others to feel okay about myself?

Why am I not good enough?
Am I the person I want to be?
What happens if my religion is wrong?
Am I worthy of love?
Am I really who I think I am?
When and why did I lose the ability to outwardly express my emotions?
Will I find my sense of purpose/belonging in this point of my life again?
Is teaching my true calling?

Making space in the curriculum for these heartfelt questions, doubts, and fears to emerge allows a class to consider the power of ambiguity and its potential for putting us (and our students) in closer touch with longings of the spirit in the context of teaching and learning. The big questions, mystery questions as Kessler (2000) called them, do not always need an answer to be instructive sources of self-knowledge. When students are given the opportunity to share their own vulnerabilities in a safe context, they can more clearly imagine a transformed notion of what it means to teach.

Teaching from Within

Scholars and educators in recent decades have drawn attention to the importance of cultivating a mindful presence in teaching. Zehm (1999), Danielewicz (2001), and Cullum (Gund & Sullivan, 2004) advocated for more emphasis on self-development in teacher preparation. Intrator and Kunzman (2006) argued that while professional development tends to focus on knowledge and skills, nurturing greater self-awareness is necessary to sustain a teacher’s growth. Other writers have talked about educating with compassion and wisdom (Miller, 2006) and strategies for integrating contemplative practices across university disciplines (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

In a three-year collaborative self-study, we explored the alignment of personal and professional identities in teacher education by applying the principles of core reflection to our own teaching practices (Kim & Greene, 2011). One of the principles in core reflection is that when we become aware of the connection to our essential nature, or core, we gain access to inner strengths like patience, compassion, courage, persistence, and love (e.g., Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Korthagen, Kim, & Greene, 2013). These core qualities, in turn, can help one access their personal capacities and potential in the moment. Using core reflection, our study sought better ways to support a perspective of wholeness and empowerment in ourselves and our students. We discovered four themes of core identity issues in the study that contributed to the emerging self-development pedagogy outlined in this chapter. These issues resulted in several significant implications in our work with students. Applying our own process from this study, we sought to build time into our teaching for students to realize and understand their emerging identities as teacher and self. Each class incorporated activities and discussions about personal development, and course assignments became more targeted to, and integrated with, issues of self-awareness. We still sought some of the same course and program outcomes, but the focus became much more strongly aimed at connecting with students’ core strengths and aligning those to the outcomes of their course work. This study led to core reflection becoming an integral part of our pedagogy with students in teacher education and is described in more detail, among other contemplative practices we used, in a subsequent publication (Greene & Kim, 2018).

Key questions from the writings mentioned above explored what it means to discover a deeper connection with one’s authentic self as a teacher, such as: Do you meet your students or yourself (Korthagen & Verkuyl, 2002)? Who is the self that teaches (Palmer, 1998)? How can we become more soulfully present in our classrooms (Greene & Kim, 2018)? These questions invite teachers to consider how their inner world is projected onto the perceptions, conditions, and relationships in their daily lessons. This body of work highlights a critical area of intersection in understanding the
teacher’s inner life; it is the area where one’s identity and development as a human being intersects with one’s identity and professional development as a teacher (e.g., Palmer, 1998; Danielewicz, 2001; Korthagen, Kim, & Greene, 2013).

The self-development as pedagogy approach presented here builds upon this work and shares a similar aim with Miller’s (2010) description of transformative teaching; this is the kind of teaching that seeks to integrate “wisdom, compassion, and sense of purpose in one’s life” to whatever subject or curriculum is being taught (p. 30). For us, this does not mean replacing discipline-based subject matter or skills with self-development, but rather that opportunities to encounter one’s essential nature should be both prominent and common in teacher education programs.

The Pedagogy

Pedagogy is not just the act of teaching, or the content knowledge and curriculum, or the methods used, it is the relationship between teaching and learning and the relationship between teachers and learners (Loughran, 2006). Korthagen (2004) adds another significant relationship to understand the complexity of pedagogy: that is, the relationship of the teacher and the learner to themselves. This perspective underscores the relevance of self-awareness in defining the nature of all other relationships. Each of these relationships is changing constantly, creating a fluid stream of possibility and also challenges to the teaching and learning environment. This rather uncommon and somewhat postmodern depiction of pedagogy is inclusive enough to hold self-development as its overarching dimension.

Three Dimensions

There are three key dimensions to the pedagogy: self-development, content, and application. The overarching and most prominent dimension is self-development. This dimension can determine an individual’s response to anything that is planned or that occurs in a class. It can affect what you bring of yourself to any given moment and to the potential of that moment. Self-development also encompasses our humanity, that is, all of those attributes, dispositions, thoughts, feelings, desires, and ideals that contribute to our human and spiritual nature. This dimension is where the expansion of one’s ability to be present, mindful, and aware occurs. All of these aspects influence one’s relationship with self and one’s relationships with others, and together they create the classroom complexity that changes from moment to moment. For teachers, this dimension largely determines how each decision, each act, and each intention is conceived. The centrality of this dimension in the pedagogy poses a new challenge for professors and teachers to consider every part of their teaching through a new lens. The syllabus, the classroom layout, the daily lesson or agenda, and the electronically supported lecture all have a place. But it’s the way we pay moment-to-moment attention to our constantly changing relationships that we can avoid losing our personal sense of wholeness behind the veil of a non-stop information flow.

The other two dimensions of the pedagogy are content and application. Elements of content can include discipline-based subject matter, theories, curricular standards, and benchmarks. Application refers to any form of practicing new skills and knowledge acquisition, including: scaffolded mentoring, internships, student teaching, and procedural training. The content and application dimensions both take into account characteristics of a more traditional view of pedagogy that considers, for instance: cognitive development, information processing, brain research on learning and memory, motivation, and individual accountability. Both content and application are linked ultimately and dependently to the momentary state of being that can be indicative of an individual’s inner condition prompted by their level of self-development.
The Va

At the heart of our pedagogy and uniting all three dimensions is the *va*, a concept we have borrowed from the worldview of many Pacific cultures, including Samoan, Fijian, Maori, and Japanese. Wendt (1999) described the *va* as “the space between, the between-ness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates . . . the space that is context, giving meaning to things. The meanings change as the relationships and the contexts change” (p. 402).

The *va* is like the breath of life in a classroom; it animates all that happens among everyone present. In this pedagogy, the *va* is like an unseen entity floating in every lesson, in each activity, in each discussion, in each silence. One can feel or sense it if a pause is taken to become aware of it. In our classrooms, once students are introduced to this concept in the first class session, they can tell in an instant whether the *va* is satisfying and energizing or whether we have become disconnected from ourselves or each other and are counting the slow minutes until the end of class. In terms of the group, happy and caring relationships are vital signs of a healthy *va*. When relationships are suffering, for whatever reason, the *va* needs attention to restore caring connections among people. As instructors, being mindful of the *va* is one of the surest and quickest ways to situate the person at forefront of the content and application dimensions of pedagogy.

Being and Becoming

Finally, the state of *being* and process of *becoming* are considered simultaneous concepts that denote both a current state of development and, at the same time, a process of developing into something new. Considering all aspects of the pedagogy, the teacher and the student are each like the bud of a fruit tree as they come to any new learning experience. They are in a state of being, with their current level of self-development affecting both the relevancy of content and the perception of their ability to apply their learning. At the same time, like the bud slowly opening to a flower and the flower slowly transforming to fruit, they are in the process of becoming something new in the very next moment. This has been a powerful analogy for students who are learning to accept themselves and their future students with fewer perceived limitations, judgments, and labels. These terms give us permission to openly accept what we find in each other and in every new class and to let go of the idea that the content is somehow more important than the person.

Embodying the Pedagogy: A Teacher’s Diary

Excerpts from Younghee’s personal teaching diary illustrate how a few of the key ideas outlined above are implemented in practice. Her diary draws from a recent course on holistic education. Using Miller’s (2007) *The Holistic Curriculum* as a text for the class to anchor content, and then applying the ideas through activities and practice, the *va* is an ever-present consideration as the relationships of self-to-self and self-to-others establish a context that promotes the emergence of transformative teaching and learning. Since the emergence of self happens for the teacher just as it does for her students, Younghee’s own personal development becomes the thread for her reflection and gives the reader intimate insights from inside the pedagogy. The overarching dimension of self-development is evident as the primary factor in content relevancy and the ability to apply it in the class.

Creating the Va

It was a hectic weekend with the end of the school year and graduation happening on Saturday. As I was finishing grading final projects, exams, and papers from three undergraduate classes, I wasn’t sure if I would be ready on Monday for the first day of the class. It is important to me to be fully present when I arrive—whole mind, heart, and spirit—for my classes and to prepare a safe and inviting space to welcome my students.
The classroom was prepared as a sacred place for the va to be naturally and organically created. Red buds of a flower plant on red striped cloth were placed in the center of the room next to red rose petals floating in a celadon bowl. Bright morning music was playing with gentle natural light streaming through large windows along one wall. Students were ready at the door anxiously waiting to enter the classroom. “The room is ready to welcome the students. Now I take a deep breath.” My inner voice spoke to me with excitement and curiosity as I met the students one by one with smiles and handshakes at the door. “Good morning! Welcome to class!” I spoke as my heart filled with joy and anticipation for the beginning of my new class. This week was going to be full, intense, and demanding for a three-credit course to be completed in a week-long time frame. However, I wanted this class to allow for a slower pace with spaces for contemplating moments in life and gently connecting with the self and others. The va was being felt and sensed through acceptance and awareness in each activity, in each discussion, and in each silence. Most significant was connecting with our spiritual selves as singing souls while our spirits unfolded as flower buds slowly opening up to their unique beauty. The words of Miller (2007) were being embodied, “By working on ourselves, we hope to foster in our students a deep sense of connectedness within themselves and to other beings on this planet” (p. 199).

Content Relevancy

The week slowly unfolded with readings and activities including meditating, deep listening, looking into each other's eyes, honoring each other, and symbolic exercises such as finding our trees and transcending to 'become' a tree, observing and smelling the flowers, drawing insects, mindful walking in nature, hands-on art, dancing like dancers, doing yoga like acrobat yogis, and writing soul journals with each meditation in class and at home.

On Wednesday morning in the warmth of summer, the whole class was standing in a circle near the band shell area in a local park. Everyone was happily gathered to experience the day at the park with shining eyes and bright smiles. The class was about to embark on an hour-long mindful solo walk on the trails and engage in other contemplative exercises. As we stepped onto the trail, we became quickly immersed in the beauty and spaciousness the park had to offer. The solo, contemplative walk was to be a symbol of our life journeys. The morning hike was followed by watercolor painting in the raw beauty of nature of the Japanese garden and meditative soul journal writing where students described soulful encounters, honest and heart-felt reflections with themselves through recognizing their beings (embodied wholeness) and their becoming (emergent wholeness). Then, we shared our home-made foods in a family style meal appreciating fresh fruits and vegetables from the season at the picnic tables. Small group reading discussions on The Holistic Curriculum chapters and presentation planning followed. We concluded with a yoga class in a full circle along with nature observations of the eco-system of the park. Miller states, “Earth connections can reawaken us to the natural processes of life. The wind, the sun, the trees, and the grass can help us come alive and awaken us from the treadmill we find ourselves on” (Miller, 2007, p. 163).

Application—Personal Efficacy

Seeing my students in nature outside the four walls of the university classroom, being happy while engaging in the tasks of the class confirmed my belief that anything that is done inside can also be done outside. This morning felt transcendent to me as well as to my students. Reflecting on my soul journal after watercolor painting, I thought, “Why not take all my classes to the park for soul-connected learning in nature for at least once each term?” Miller’s
words remind me, “By connecting mind and body, we facilitate human wholeness” (Miller, 2007, p. 128).

The week was unfolding to ignite our spirits and passions for cultivating a deep sense of purpose in our vocations. We were acutely aware of commitments to ourselves, to caring for nature and the earth, and to helping people who are not so equitably privileged. We asked the question: What can we do, as privileged individuals and teachers, to challenge ourselves and give of ourselves to humanity with compassion and sincerity? Together, we grappled with our deep concerns and commitment for our environment on the issue of ecological sustainability for both the earth and humanity. As Miller (2006) points out, one of the characteristics of timeless learning is “participatory,” we realized that we are not just enjoying the nature’s beauty but also actively committing ourselves to nurture and protecting the environment that we live in. We arrived to a deeper place together as a class.

Self-development

I thought back to how I started my career as a holistic teacher educator. I began as a traditional teacher educator adhering to standard institutional expectations. It was when I met Dr. Jack Miller, a prominent leader in holistic education, in one of the holistic teaching and learning sessions at the American Educational Research Association conference about ten years ago, that I was deeply moved by his examples of authenticity, presence, wisdom, and compassion in education. Little did I know that this encounter would shape and influence my own journey as a teacher educator. I found balance and became more grounded in my intentions. I have felt a constant and deep desire to grow and adapt my pedagogy to better blend intellectual, analytical approaches with self-development and heart-based learning approaches. Miller (2007) reminds us, “Change is interdependent and dynamic. The more we become attuned to this reality the deeper and more powerful the change that occurs” (p. 195).

Being—Embodied Wholeness

However, there are questions in my mind. What about course content? What about accountability? Am I doing what I am supposed to be doing in teacher education? What does it mean to me to be a teacher educator with a thinking heart and quiet mind in this day and age of technological impulses? How could a university professor dare to teach from the heart and not from the head as licensing standards and benchmarks seem to require? How should I teach my students to pass their portfolio and performance assessments? While these are important topics to address in teacher education programs, they still focus on the traditional schooling values of cognitive or intellect-oriented teaching and testing. An educational system that solely teaches to the rational mind, but disregards the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the students is completely unbalanced. Miller (2007) provides simple yet profound advice: “Teachers should simply learn to be with students. In being with students, we are fully present” (p. 192).

My holistic education class presented a taste of transformation to all of us. Our analytical minds bowed to compassionate hearts, and it was incredible to experience this collectively. Despite my small physical stature, I feel I have grown tall and deep inside. My soul and spirit have grown. As I encourage my students to recognize and embrace their core qualities, I also find I have learned alongside them to bring to the surface my own strengths. I felt that I finally found my identity as a teacher educator according to my own beliefs and ideals. As this was only a new beginning of my deeper self-development, I embodied my wholeness to teach from my full authenticity, presence, and awareness.
Becoming—Emergent Wholeness

How can I move forward accordingly with this revelation? Perhaps the most intimate question to ask is not how much knowledge we have gained, but more importantly, have we experienced a deeper sense of self and outward compassion as teachers and learners? If I can create a space that nurtures my student’s senses, creative minds, sense of wholeness, wonder and curiosity, and desire to explore and connect with themselves and nature, our souls can meet each other. If I can nourish the souls of my students and truly believe in and respect them, I can remind them of their talents and core qualities. If I see the innocence, beauty, and perfection in their spirits, and truly love and honor my students as who they are, I can invite them to rise to their potential.

Conclusion

As Younghee’s diary suggests, teachers and professors need to attend to their own self-development if they expect their students to do the same; otherwise, how will they guide them toward their potential as learners until they have encountered this potential in themselves? While teachers may feel like they are swimming against a current of status quo pedagogy, there are important reasons for balancing the content and application of their pedagogy with self-development.

First, self-development matters. Just as we hope to remind our students who they are, they also can remind us who we are. During those moments of greatest weakness, confusion, or feelings of disconnection with our students or with our subjects, perhaps by paying deep attention to the va and to each other, we might reconnect to a quality or an ideal within ourselves that beckons us back to a place of strength or larger sense of purpose. In that state of presence and awareness, the self can more effectively integrate both subject content and its teaching application. Palmer (1998) said, “The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts—the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self” (p. 11). When teacher candidates encounter content and skills through a closer look at who they are in their learning, they begin to imagine how it might be to bring personal and holistic learning to their future classrooms.

Second, teachers and their students bring a diverse range of psychological conditioning to each new experience, and some will resist or be critical toward activities that invite open sharing of themselves with each other. There are inherent tensions and risks whenever we allow ourselves to be vulnerable in new or uncharted venues and with others who, for all we know, may be evaluating each other’s professional worthiness, prompting guarded behaviors. Any new approach should be handled wisely and sensitively. Some of our experiences with these phenomena have been documented elsewhere (Greene & Kim, 2018; Kim & Greene, 2011). In spite of the uncertainties in facilitating self-development, many of our students are becoming teachers, and we hope they will build for themselves the kind of classroom culture where vulnerability can be seen as an asset, can be introduced safely, lovingly, and gradually, and where the learning environment can become a place of honesty and openness. In our classrooms, more often than not, poignant expressions of truth and emotional clarity emerge following activities that invited vulnerability and self-exploration. In these profoundly teachable yet delicate moments, we can glimpse what R. Miller (1999) called “the multifaceted mystery of human existence” (p. 194).
Finally, this pedagogy only works when it is genuine. Instructors must be open to the levels of self-discovery, vulnerability, and connectedness that they hope to engender in others. Students will sense the teacher’s full presence and authenticity in modeling these attributes. When it works, it has the capability to draw the best from each person and relationship. It can transform each idea, feeling, and action in the classroom into something that expands the experience of learning for all.

This closing anecdote came from a diversity course we co-taught in our Master of Arts in Teaching program. After students had completed several activities on being fully present with someone else, one of the secondary math students raised his hand and said, “This makes me love my students before I even meet them.” His comment silenced the class. He got it. They got it. He would be teaching math someday, but more importantly, he would be teaching his students. He would love them before he knew them by preparing himself to see them with his heart. He understood that his true power as a teacher would come from embracing his own wholeness and that he can meet his future students in a more soulful way than he might have imagined. When we honor our souls, we enlarge our capacity for honoring others’ souls, too. This, truly, is what our students are really here for.

References


