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Kairos: A Time for Educational Transformation

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With an appropriate amount of certitude it seems fair to call this period of time a kairos moment, a term used by the Greeks to describe the most opportune conditions (referring especially to time) for action. And, it seems that many of those who are directly involved in education recognize this call for transformation. As a high school English Language Arts teacher for fifteen years, I have been involved in small and large movements from technology to book banning to teachers rights, but there is nothing that touches the level of this global pandemic. Although there is no solace found in the loss of human life, this moment unveiled some truths about my teaching practices that I may never have questioned and felt necessary to change had the pandemic not forced me to look squarely at what wasn't working.

Similar to most transformations, mine was messy and imperfect.

First, I fell into a fairly deep depression, blamed the school system, and decided to resign from the profession altogether. While desperately looking for a new career, I fell into a deeper, heavier emotional space than I had initially found myself. In this darkness, the acknowledgement that teaching was not only a career, but a significant part of my identity, was illuminated.

One particularly hot summer day, at a bazaar with my daughter, I happened to come eyelevel with Noam Chomsky's *Miseducation*. On a whim, I bought it. Within pages, I felt my teaching spirit ignite for the first time in years. Almost immediately, I recognized that education wasn't the problem, my approach over time had become misaligned with my values

about teaching and learning. This realization set me on a path of questioning, researching, writing, connecting, and embracing teaching in a completely new way.

Through Chomsky, I was reminded of the spirit that brought me to education in the first place. My high school English teacher, Ms. Kenney, was a student of George Hillocks at the University of Chicago in the early nineties. She brought his style of critical inquiry and thematic teaching into our classroom, transforming learning into something interesting, relevant, and meaningful. This was the experience I wanted to replicate for my students. I was also reminded of the fire with which critical pedagogues like Paulo Friere, Peter McLaren, bell hooks, and Henry Giroux approached education in an unapologetic and purposeful way. All of them had been formative in my graduate studies. Their work served as the framework for my master's thesis on fostering critical discussions in the classroom.

Somewhere along the way this fire dampened under stacks of papers, data dialogues, new technologies, committee participation, rubrics, grades, accountability, standardized lessons, and the myriad other diversions from the task of teaching. Despite my youthful desire to eschew the rigidity of standardized and dispassionate teaching that automatized student learning, it was less exhausting (and safer) to comply with the "rank and file banking model" (Friere) inherited by all public school teachers. Essentially, over time, I failed to be the critical and meaningful teacher my students deserved.

Now, quite urgently, I understood that in order to remain in education I had to begin again: to engage in the process of deeply challenging all I believed to be true or right about education. It was this reflection that pushed me to dive, head first, into the project of “unlearning” everything I knew wasn’t working.

This process of “unlearning” yesterday’s world led me to reflect on four critical questions:

- What and who is education for?
- In what environments and systems do we learn best?
- Why are we inclined to seek knowledge to begin with?
- How can I be of service to my students?

These questions brought me to a new place of fierce devotion to education and to the young people who enter my classroom as vulnerable and complex humans.

In my experience, there were two essential steps necessary for transformation. First, I found critical questioning to be the most crucial in unlearning past systems. The second step was finding the confidence for risk taking. The imperative need for risk taking led me to a more engaged study of educational research and theory.

This process was mentally stimulating and professionally liberating. The internet provides expansive accessibility to all types of scholarly research and new ideas. And now, I had the right questions to begin my search. I utilized Google scholar to curate relevant studies and articles. In less than a mere second, I found a multitude of answers within academic fields like cognitive science, child and adolescent development, and neuroscience. Many findings mirrored the indirect lessons of my English teacher and direct teaching of critical pedagogues, all of whom understood that learning is complex, messy, and contextual. These studies generated more questions and my

curiosity, my passion to know more, was further ignited. As the research continued to propel me into new ideas about learning and teaching, I sought out educational blogs, books, and podcasts to learn from those who were implementing these methods in their classrooms.

By grounding myself in research and new teaching methodologies, I was able to take risks that I ordinarily would not attempt. To be clear, the teaching philosophies and practices that I settled on are not necessarily more correct than others, they simply manifested from deep personal reflection and their epistemologies were resonant with my beliefs. Notably, however, we must recognize that there are practices under the essentialist and behaviorist models of education that are harmful to students. These should be closely examined and deliberately removed if one is to foster an authentic culture of learning in their classrooms.

The process of critiquing and questioning my teaching transported me back to the theory of critical pedagogy, which I used to ground the application of inquiry-based learning (IBL). Both critical pedagogy and IBL are similar to the critical questioning and student relevant approaches of the Hilloksian methodology my English teacher had utilized when I was her student. While connecting Hillocks’s thematic, student centered approach to critical pedagogy and IBL, Ms. Kenney’s rationale for using essential questions to make content relatable and important became clear.

For example, when we studied Transcendentalism in US Literature she led with questions like:

- “What is civility?”
- “What is obedience?”
- “Are there justifications for breaking rules?”
- “Who makes the rules?”

These questions evolved into discussions, paired with texts that supported multiple perspectives and relevant stories. Her seemingly simple approach to teaching brought life and real curiosity back to learning. I now understood that she had carefully crafted her questions, deliberately created a discussion focused class, and intentionally chose texts to challenge our thinking and biases. More so, I realized her approach was grounded in substantive research which gave me the confidence to fully implement this approach with my own students.

With a clear direction and well established research, I began planning and organizing my courses. As the summer came to a close and classes began, I had a firm grasp on the teacher I would grow to be.

What remains is a reflection on the manifestation of that work.

In my classroom, critical pedagogy primarily appears through my interaction with students. This takes its roots from critical theory which seeks to examine and understand how systems of oppression originated, how they are adapted over time, and how they are currently perpetuated and embodied by all members of any given society. Critical pedagogy looks closely at how teaching, learning, and institutions of education fail to challenge systems of oppression and oftentimes work to perpetuate and strengthen prevailing oppressive systems through what is taught, what is not taught; what is valued, what is not valued; who is worthy, who is not worthy.

When engaging with students I remind myself that I am working with and supporting complex human beings, all of whom are worthy of attention, love, and quality education. It's a reflexive practice that appears simple, but can be quite challenging as it requires a constant vigilance of ingrained biases and default

settings that are typically tested by our most emotionally struggling students. This is where the practices of culturally responsive teaching and social emotional learning can be extremely helpful as they provide guidance for how to be proactive and supportive as opposed to reactive and punitive.

Inquiry Based Learning as a foundational practice allows me to step directly into centering everyday experiences around increasing student relationships, engagement, and curiosity. This methodology relies on questions to direct student learning as opposed to prescribed information given to students as facts to memorize. IBL can trace its roots from early constructivist and progressive learning theorists like John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, and Jean Piaget, all of whom were likely a part of most teacher preparation curricula. Today, IBL has taken a variety of directions and there are myriad ways to utilize this approach; however, I believe it's important to keep in mind that in the foreground of IBL, teachers are as much the learner as the students, and the focus is around curiosity and questioning.

In utilizing IBL with fidelity teachers have to be willing to engage in the process of inquiry with students, not for students, from the development of the topic and questions, to the research, to the project completion. Which means we need to let go of authoritarian control and trust that students are capable of directing their learning. A great place to begin is to ask students to consider what they value, what they would like to understand more, and what problems they would like to solve. A handbook from The Human Institute for Education called *How to Be a Solutionary* provides an excellent starting place for any educator on how to dive into this process so that it has real meaning for learners.

When introducing IBL I often share Rainer Maria Rilke's explanation in *Letters to a Young Poet* of "living the questions." While reflecting on Rilke's thoughts, we discuss that we may not solve a problem in a few weeks or that they may not find a direct and simple answer to their questions. What is important is that we learn to ask meaningful questions about what it means to be human and develop tools that give us hope for solving problems that are currently in the way of human progress and life satisfaction.

Under the general practice of IBL, researched methods like Universal Design Learning, Project Based Learning, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Social and Emotional Learning (depending on the goals of the course) provide me with guidance to reach all students throughout the semester or year. Because these teaching practices rely heavily on one-to-one and small group interactions, I am able to connect with what students are experiencing at any given moment. I notice when my language or method of communication becomes ineffective by the way a student will respond verbally and nonverbally. This recognition comes from the deliberate embodying of the practices that fit under the tenets of critical pedagogy.

The intention placed on relationships, allows me to notice when the general curriculum or the daily lesson I have chosen is not working for all of my students, or a group of students, or an individual student. When this happens, I do not shut down or blame my students for being lazy, ungrateful, or media-addicted troglodytes. Instead, I reflect, ask questions, and reassess my intentions and the goals for the unit or lesson: I ask, "What can I change to meet my students' needs at this moment?" I then ask them the same question so that we can collaborate in the process of learning. All of this works best when our course learning

outcomes have been created, discussed, and frequently revisited together as a group.

These outcomes are a cross-pollination between our district's priority state standards for ELA and my teaching philosophy (developing priority standards was a two year process completed by the English departments in my district, without this hard work from our team, creating learning outcomes would have been a much more laborious project). Each learning outcome is tied directly to a concrete learning goal. For example, in eleventh grade a student's "argumentative writing" learning outcome reads: "Students write effective reason-based arguments to communicate ideas and beliefs, teach others, and make an impact on their local and global communities." I created ten of these outcomes for each course and focused on five per semester. The fewer explicit learning outcomes the better. Too many outcomes overwhelm students thus depreciating their investment in learning.

Without these outcomes at the forefront of what we do, it is near impossible to ask students to advocate for their own learning, as it is unclear to them what they are supposed to know or what they want to know. When I explain specific course outcomes early on, I ask students to articulate them using their own language and words and to revisit them consistently. This provides them the guidance to own and advocate for their learning.

I have found that a transparent foundational approach to a course empowers a student with two key critical tasks: the ability to ask, "How does this connect to my learning?" and "Is there a different way that I can demonstrate my understanding and process of engagement with this outcome other than what is provided?" For example, this year I had a group of students decide that they wanted to create an episodic podcast as opposed to a written analysis in

order to meet a "close reading" learning outcome on Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Their product met all the goals of the outcome and demonstrated a complex and rich understanding of Woolf's message about the inequitable barriers female artists endure.

In order for students to become advocates for their learning and assessment choices, I provide question asking techniques, encourage them to think metacognitively about their learning, and celebrate their vulnerability and risk-taking moments by amplifying the voices of those who choose a path of their own. I also utilize their work as models to inspire others. Some students, especially those that are high achieving and compliant, struggle to work outside the rigid structures they have operated under most of their lives. We have to teach, model, and constantly demonstrate how advocating for learning can be accomplished until they "unlearn" their own schooling habits.

At the end of the day, all of this will fall apart if I am the sole assessor of my students' learning. I cannot at once claim that my classroom is democratically student centered and be the only one assessing their learning. If I cannot empower my students to measure their learning and believe that they are capable of such a feat, then I have essentially misled them. I have led them kindly, but under false pretenses, to an ultimate judgment that I hypocritically make for them, one that remains with them on a report for others to see and judge: celebrate or scrutinize.

For this reason, and many others, I am a firm believer in the gradeless or ungrading movement. There is ample and compelling evidence to support the argument that gradeless systems in education increase intrinsic motivation, eliminate cheating, and foster collaborative and safe places to learn (Kohn).

Critiques of grade systems date back to the early twentieth century, when grades and scores were beginning to take form. In a study published in 1913, I.E. Finklestein wrote:

When we consider the practically universal use in all education institutions of a system of marks, whether numbers or letters, to indicate scholastic attainment of the...students...and when we remember how very great stress is laid by teachers and pupils alike upon these marks as real measures or indicators of attainment, we can but be astonished by the blind faith...in the reliability of the marking system. (1)

This sort of criticism continues to evolve as educators and researchers report on the drastically inequitable and punitive consequences of point scales and grading systems, which inaccurately and arbitrarily measure the intelligence and learning development of any given student.

If teachers are able to create a more equitable and human-centered system of assessing students' achievements and growth, the pathways are already set. If this is not feasible, teachers can try methods like delaying the grade, allowing students to assess themselves, giving fewer (if any) high stakes assessments, celebrating collaboration without competition, removing hard due dates, providing revision opportunities, giving feedback without a grade attached, and simply placing less emphasis on the final product and more on the process. The choice to change the way we see assessment allows us to reach more fully into the uncharted territory of what education can be, by "unlearning" a system that is fundamentally flawed.

This is a *kairos* moment in education. As we attempt to reorient our lives, the institution of education has been presented with the opportune time for action. It is therefore imperative that we look forward

and avoid rushing back to what wasn't working. If teachers and students begin to question and critique the failed systems that we see, perhaps we will be able to transform the educational experience to one that students desire to have and teachers feel inspired to facilitate.

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