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Identity, Access, and Innovation

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Curriculum Project: From “I Am From” to “Where I Am Going”

While designing this curriculum, I had a bunch of ideas of identity-related activities that could be used in class, but I came across a lot of roadblocks while planning. When I was considering the connection between identity and access, I decided that the overall learning objective for my curriculum would be to engage my students in a conversation about how they understand their identities, both as students and individuals in their communities, and how they can see themselves pursuing higher education. The other goal was to allow students to share their backgrounds with their classmates to help build classroom solidarity. The culminating project would result in a written personal narrative that could possibly be used for a high school application essay. These learning objectives for the two-week curriculum were inspired by my dissatisfaction with my K-12 education, where I frequently wished for opportunities to talk and learn more about my classmates and myself. I concluded that I rarely had the chance to discuss my experiences as a Cambodian-American in school. Had I been given the opportunity to do so, I would have had the vocabulary and resources to name the discomfort I felt in many of my classes and found ways to take more ownership over my educational experience.

First, I had to consider what grade this curriculum would be for. I initially wanted to design this curriculum for a 6th grade writing class because I have had experience teaching writing in that age group. However, I remembered how much of a big transitional period it is for the students. At their age, 6th grade students are rapidly developing physically and emotionally, and I was worried that, along with trying to teach them middle school expectations, they would have a lot of trouble talking about their sense of identity as students and individuals.

My choice to design an identity-based curriculum for a writing class was a difficult one to make as well. At some point while brainstorming a list of activities that could last the whole 55-minute period, I remembered that I needed to incorporate time to teach writing content. I was so excited to have the opportunity to freely design an innovative curriculum that I forgot about the reality of teaching. I needed to find ways to get students to do these activities while teaching them how to write. I recalled how difficult it was to teach writing – writing is something that I only think of doing, and rarely do I consider how I do it. When I taught 6th grade writing I had to teach students how to write persuasive essays, and my students and I quickly realized how formulaic writing could be. When teaching students how to write in a certain style, it was difficult to be creative because my most important goal was to clearly explain and demonstrate to the students how to do it. As their teacher I had to make sure they understood the lesson and could demonstrate this new skill that I taught them. I knew that my coworkers who taught 7th and 8th grade writing got to focus on teaching how to write from a personal, story-telling angle. I decided that this content would be a better fit for 8th graders instead.

The demographics of the class I envisioned while designing this curriculum is based off of the population I taught this past summer through an academically rigorous enrichment program for 5th-8th grade students. Many of the students were first generation, low-income students who came from supportive families. All of the students had long term goals of going to college, and chose to attend classes over the summer to get some extra learning time and immerse themselves in a college-going culture. Because most students at this program were people of color, I thought that it was very important to give these students a safe space to discuss their perceptions of their identities and experiences at school. I wanted to send my students the message that identity conversations are welcomed and should be encouraged in an academic space. The impression I got from my K-12 education was that conversations about identity were not meant for the classroom, and that made me feel silenced as a student. Personal feelings and stories should be appreciated and validated in academic spaces.

I designed this curriculum by coming up with activities that were loosely based off of Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE) and citizenship education. Both approaches try to get students to understand that what they see happening in the world around them is relevant to their daily lives, even in school. In HHBE, students saw that the texts they read in class reflected the “extreme local” (Hill 40). This was encouraging for students’ learning because it emphasized their believability. Students hearing specific names and terms from the outside world in a classroom space made it feel more real to them. Learning how to write in a specific style can be made more interesting if teachers can show how “real” and relevant the things students learn about in school apply in their daily lives. Teaching writing while using culturally relevant materials and resources is a way to show students that their experiences are legitimate and valuable. All too often I hear my peers talk about how it was not until college that they were allowed this type of identity-based learning. This is just one way for teachers to motivate and engage students (Hill 40).

Similarly, with citizenship education, I want my students to think about their “social belonging” so that they may “exercise their participation as democratic citizens” (Abu El Haj 1). If schools are seen as educational institutions that teach students how to be contributive members of society, why do students still get to college and complain that they did not learn real world skills or have these identity-related conversations? I wanted to make sure that this curriculum would allow students to think about where they come from, how they experience the world, how others perceive them, and why that is. Although many of these topics of conversation might seem like they are too heavy or even inappropriate to discuss in school, I would argue that these conversations are necessary because students will need to think critically about issues of race, class, gender, etc. which affect everyone. I want my students to reflect on their homes and communities and think about how they can engage in conversations as “full participants” (Abu El-Haj 3). Although this is a writing class, I want for my students to see writing as an outlet and platform for them to express themselves freely and ask each other difficult questions. The end of this curriculum unit will result in students writing a personal narrative – one of many forms of story telling. I want for my students to reflect and take pride on their journey as invested, young students in this program and how that journey will look when they get to college.

The difficult thing about trying to be innovative about designing a curriculum is understanding that change is hard for a lot of people, and that the high-stakes testing culture in schools can limit my ability to carry out this curriculum. What I like about this curriculum, however, is that we are still working towards a larger assignment while learning how to write in a certain style, but students are still encouraged to tap into their own experiences and share with others along the way. My hope in designing this curriculum is to validate students’ experiences inside and outside of school and allow them the safe space to discuss these issues in a space that might normally overlook where students are coming from.

Works Cited

Abu El-Haj, Thea Renda. “Imagining Postnationalism: Arts, Citizenship Education, and Arab American Youth.” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 40:1. 2009.

Hill, Marc Lamont. “Real Recognize Real.” Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity. Teachers College Press, 2009

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| **Day 1**  **(55 minutes)**  **Objective:** Students will be able to (SWBAT)establish classroom expectations and begin getting to know each other  **Proving behavior:** by brainstorming classroom expectations as a class and participating in icebreakers.   * Students will participate in a game of “Two Truths & A Lie”; explain rules of the game and act out an example * Students will write down their two truths and a lie on a sheet of paper and pass it in for teacher to read it aloud * Students will guess who wrote what * After that, students will take turns trying to name everyone in the room; can use animals or adjectives that start with the same letter of person’s name for purpose of memorization * Have students take a moment to write what they expect from their classmates and themselves in the classroom * Student scribe will record it on chart paper * All students will sign it to confirm that they will try to make this a productive and welcoming space * Hang sheet up in prominent area of classroom and refer to it when necessary to remind students of the expectations they came up with   **Homework:** Students will write a paragraph about what they hope to do and learn in this class this summer. What are some academic and social goals for this summer? Fears and hopes? | **Day 2**  **(55 minutes)**  **Objective:** SWBAT discuss different factors that can be included in conversations revolving around identity and talk about what identities are both represented and left out in the class  **Proving behavior:** by taking notes individually and then sharing ideas with the whole class.   * Give students notecards and prompt them to answer questions (i.e. “list five different aspects of your identity”) * Have them share with a partner, also ask for a few students to share with the whole class * List different identities on chart paper * Have students talk to each other about what words and terms came up during the share-out   **Homework:** Students will write a 1-2 page paper describing what aspect of their identities they think about the most and the least, and why. | **Day 3**  **(55 minutes)**  **Objective:** SWBAT share what they wrote for the homework assignment with the rest of the class and then discuss what they found interesting and/or unsettling about what was shared  **Proving behavior:** by practicing active listening and asking each other questions.   * Students read or summarize their homework responses to a partner * Go over classroom expectations and guidelines for class conversations, as identity can be a very personal topic * Have all students form a circle with their desks and discuss what they wrote and have them respond to each other * Facilitate as needed, provide prompts and questions   **Homework:** Students will take notes on the sights, sounds, smells, etc. they experience in their home and communities in order to prepare to write “I Am From” poems. | **Day 4**  **(55 minutes)**  **Objective:** SWBAT produce “I Am From” poems in class  **Proving behavior:** by referring to past homework assignments, class conversations, notes and free writing.   * Show examples of “I Am From” poems; can be in form of Youtube videos or print materials * Have students take out their notes from past classes about identity * Provide a sample template of an “I Am From” poem * Have students free write/create “I Am From” poems for rest of class period * Answer questions if necessary   **Homework:** Students will finish their “I Am From” poems if they have not already done so. | **Day 5**  **(45 minutes)**  **Objective:** SWBAT analyze the role of schooling and education in their lives  **Proving behavior:** by actively listening to their classmates’ answers and responding to prompts during a fish bowl activity.   * Discuss what the class thinks the purpose of school is * Go over guidelines for classroom discussions * Have students place four desks in the middle of the classroom; solicit volunteers to participate * Explain what the fish bowl activity is * Students will respond to prompts, and “step up, step down” as they see fit   **Homework:** Students will write a short journal entry about a time they felt like their identities were ignored in school, and suggestions on how the school could have better approached it. |
| **Day 6**  **(55 minutes)**  **Objective:** Students will share how and why they got involved in this college access program  **Proving Behavior:** by free writing and then participating in a human barometer   * Students will be given 15 minutes to free write * Explain what the human barometer activity is * They will line themselves up during the human barometer activity and respond to prompts about their beliefs and opinions about higher education * Remind them that they are allowed to move if their opinions change   **Homework:** Students will find a friend, classmate, parent, etc. at home or at school and ask about what access to education means to them. | **Day 7**  **(55 minutes)**  **Objective:** SWBAT will reflect on their growth as scholars and individuals since joining this college access program  **Proving Behavior:** by writing their responses to prompts in their journals and sharing their thoughts with the rest of the class.   * Students will free write in their journals * Teacher will take notes on what is shared * Students can comment on each other’s experiences, however different or similar they might be   **Homework:** Students will jot down ideas on important experiences that they think would be important or interesting to write about for a personal narrative. | **Day 8**  **(55 minutes)**  **Objective:** SWBAT create an outline for a personal narrative that could be used as a writing sample for their high school application  **Proving Behavior:** by organizing their thoughts and ideas using a graphic organizer.   * Briefly discuss homework responses and talk about the importance of identity and how that can be appreciated and valued by schools * Review what an outline is and what the purpose of using one is * Review what a personal narrative is and what they can be used for   **Homework:** Students will finish their graphic organizers if they have not already done so. | **Day 9**  **(55 minutes)**  **Objective:** SWBAT will begin writing their personal narratives  **Proving Behavior:** by productively using class time to write.   * Provide students with an example of personal narrative * As a class, go over and identify parts of a personal narrative * Provide student with prompts to guide them while they write * Students will have the whole class period to write   **Homework:** Students will finish their first draft of their personal narrative. | **Day 10**  **(45 minutes)**  **Objective:** SWBAT get feedback on their first draft from classmates  **Proving Behavior:** by using peer-editing strategies.   * Review the writing process as a class * Discuss what constructive criticism looks like * Review editing strategies * Students will pair up with someone they don’t know very well * Students will edit and discuss their drafts for rest of class period   **Homework:** Students will write revise their papers and bring in a new copy. |