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Taking it personally:

The role of memoirs in teacher education

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Abstract

The current popularity of memoirs and book groups is a cue to education faculty. When complemented by discussion groups and writing assignments, memoirs can be used to facilitate the process of inclusion in the schools by teaching both general and special educators about children with disabilities and their families. These works can also promote quality reading and writing, inspire original and insightful responses from students, and foster a sense of community in class. Some advantages and previous applications of this method are described and recommendations for implementation are made.

Taking it personally:

The role of memoirs in teacher education

According to Gray (1997), memoirs may be replacing novels as America's most popular printed product. These autobiographical works are being published at an amazing rate. Parini (1998) describes how in his "local bookstore, tall stacks of such books rise in unstable towers beside squat, less impressive stacks of recent novels" (p. A40). While some of these works are tributes to narcissism or dreadfully written confessionals, others are poignant recollections that offer a new world to readers.

In addition to America's love affair with the memoir, there has been a proliferation of book groups. Cregan (1997) believes that this trend signals the resurgence of reading as a popular pastime and that these book groups, rather than scholarly critics, are providing many people with guidance in their reading. Oprah Winfrey has a well-known television book club; bookstores and publishers are promoting reading groups; where is higher education in this equation?

I have used personal accounts, such as Let Me Hear Your Voice by Catherine Maurice, Life as We Know It, by Michael Berube, and The Broken Cord, by Michael Dorris, to teach students about the lives of disabled children. Many of my students reported that they had gone on to select and read similar books after the semester was over. A few even asked for recommendations for future reading. I have never, ever been approached by a student who bought an additional textbook because the first one was so compelling.

Advantages of the Pedagogical Use of Memoirs

Memoirs can be used to bridge the gap between general and special education. Many teachers are apprehensive about the integration of students with disabilities into general education classrooms; some have demonstrated strong resistance. Their reluctance is understandable because few of these

teachers have received specialized training at the pre- or in-service level. Despite the debate, there is little doubt that educational policy is moving towards teaching these children in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and general educators will be assuming more responsibility for providing instruction to all students. Teacher educators are looking for ways to introduce teachers to children with disabilities and their families. Why not let them introduce themselves?

The content of memoirs adds a new dimension to student understanding. Textbooks are valuable but they are unlikely to capture the lives of disabled children in the same way or have the same impact as the recollections and reflections of a parent. For example, statistics on alcohol consumption among Native Americans are easily forgotten. However, many of my pre-service teachers recalled that in The Broken Cord, the author, Michael Dorris (1990), described poverty-stricken Native American women, like the mother of his adoptive son, who, unable to purchase alcohol, desperately drank anti-freeze to get high, even during pregnancy. Students always report that important information is powerfully communicated in these works.

Memoirs offer many other benefits in addition to illuminating the lives of children with special needs. College and graduate students deserve and apparently need guidance in their reading. After examining campus best seller lists for the past twenty years or so, Shapiro (1998) concluded that colleges are doing a poor job of nurturing discriminating readers. Sales of cartoon and self-help books have far outpaced those of quality nonfiction. Teaching through memoirs and other quality books is one way faculty can get involved in shaping students' literary culture and helping them make better reading decisions.

Furthermore, this type of reading easily lends itself to writing and writing means learning. Through the act of writing, most students genuinely absorb ideas and information. There is little doubt that emphasizing writing in education classes is valuable for both strong and weak writers. Writing allows more time for careful consideration and provides a much needed opportunity to practice a skill teachers will use every day. The fresh material in memoirs generally encourages fresh writing. In fact, it has been my experience that regular discussion and short papers outmaneuver even dedicated shirkers, plagiarists, and procrastinators.

Memoirs and related activities can be harnessed to increase students comprehension and critical thinking. There is no question that these elements must be integrated into the education curriculum. Summarizing, interpreting, relating, hypothesizing, and analyzing are all part of teaching with memoirs. Language can be taught as an integrated system. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are all used to foster reasoning and reflection.

Memoirs build insight. Textbooks are organized to cover content rather than stimulate thinking (Haas & Keeley, 1998). In contrast, memoirs usually have an emotional impact on readers which facilitates thinking (Halonen, 1995) and increases motivation. Students are guided through the process of reflective thinking with the memoir as a model. During the writing and discussion phases, students experiment with their ideas and receive feedback. In sum, they are primed to process their own experiences.

Memoirs and book groups can create a sense of community in class. Willimon and Naylor (1995) lament the loss of community on campus and note that there's nothing unified about the misnamed university. Isolation and loneliness are common and opportunities for quality interaction are limited. Ever increasing numbers of non-traditional students and commuters are grappling with especially serious issues of marginalization and estrangement.

Of course, memoirs and book groups cannot completely remedy these problems but this type of pedagogy does encourage cooperation and camaraderie in class. The small discussion groups offer students a different and more friendly way to interact with each other and their instructor. In small groups, students feel safe to question, criticize, disagree, and even get to know each other. This capitalizes on the social context of learning and makes class more enjoyable for everyone.

Previous Applications

The sheer number of books in this genre ensures that memoirs can be used in a wide variety of education courses to meet a broad range of goals. Review of the literature indicates that memoirs and autobiographies have been used to broaden students' cultural horizons (Cooper, 1992; Holmes, 1995) and to provide them with unique and accurate descriptions of complex developmental and educational phenomena.

Harner and Romer (1992) used the childhood recollections of a college student to help prospective teachers understand child psychology, particularly the roles of adults in a child's world. Baghban (1998) utilized the recollections of famous authors to help teachers expand their understanding of reading and writing as valuable processes for themselves and their students.

Through a book club with monthly meetings, Florio-Ruane and deTar (1994) investigated the potential of peer discussion in teacher education. These researchers invited six teacher candidates to read, write about, and discuss autobiographies. These meetings yielded both personal response and critical reading of the books, as well as many forms of formal and informal dialogue among peers.

There are many reports of success in teaching with memoirs. These books can be used to change student's perceptions. It is important to note that perceptions play a major role in the effectiveness of mainstreaming and inclusion programs (National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion, 1994). Memoirs can help both general and special educators learn to truly value individual differences.

Implementation

Small Group Discussion

There is wide agreement that students learn better when they are actively engaged and working cooperatively with peers and instructors. For this reason and others, this teaching technique revolves around the idea of book discussion groups. Classes are divided into small sets to share reactions to the readings. It is important to note that groups tend to get unwieldy if they are larger than six or seven students. I have arranged twenty to thirty minute group meetings on a bi- or triweekly basis during the course of a semester. Group meetings may be scheduled during or outside class time.

If a class is reading more than one book, combining readers of different books in the groups may seem like a good idea. However, when asked, my students preferred to be grouped with readers of the same book and to stay in the same group throughout the semester. In fact, many students, particularly women, find it easier to develop and articulate their ideas in the context of trust, longevity, and connection (Clinchy, 1995). Ideally, group members should meet briefly before they start reading to introduce themselves and decide how far they would like to read between meetings. This creates the groundwork for subsequent discussions.

While some groups launched into spirited debate and discussion, needing no help at all, others stalled or digressed. Some students belong to book groups or salons outside class but others do not have experience with this kind of discussion and will need assistance. Instructors can teach students to generate their own thoughtful questions and responses with guidance. King (1995) describes a teaching approach which facilitates critical thinking through exemplar questions. In her courses, she distributes a list of generic critical thinking questions, models the use of such questions, and circulates around the classroom to listen to small groups as they discuss and answer these questions. I have used this procedure, handing out lists of thought-provoking questions, both broad and directly related to the readings. Whether questions are distributed, or the instructor simply joins each small group in turn and models appropriate behavior, it is important to remember that many students will start to talk about campus parking problems or similar issues if a workable structure is not in place.

After precedents are set, book groups can productively discuss many equally valid but dramatically different topics, including personal experience. This is valuable because it provides an appropriate forum for firsthand narrative as part of the learning process. It is well-known that students learn more when they are personally invested and connected, yet many in higher education devalue personal information. Clinchy (1995) reports that many students wish for and appreciate the elicitation and exploration of their experiences and common sense views in class. These small groups can be a haven for individual recollections that are important but may or may not be desirable during lectures or other types of lessons.

Writing Assignments

Writing is an important aspect of teaching with memoirs because it furthers instructional objectives and is a fitting assessment procedure. In any course, assignments should be congruent with the kinds of learning emphasized. With memoirs, thoughtful discussion and reflection are promoted, written-work should reflect this emphasis.

Different formats can be used depending on the instructor's goals. Both short, in-class essays and more formal papers are possible. I have received papers that have addressed the main points and themes of the book, strengths and weaknesses of the characters, high and low points while reading, and evaluation of the book for purposes of enjoyment or education. I encourage students to relate what they have read to their experiences in the classroom and their perspective on disability.

Much like the small group discussion, guidance will be necessary to facilitate quality writing. Students report having little experience with this type of assignment. Even the most open-minded instructor should clearly articulate the requirements of the task. For example, a few students took my suggestion to "critique" to mean carp and cavil and turned the assignment into an invitation for extended complaining with little or no fruition or insight. Despite setbacks, it has been my experience that most students are well capable of generating much more than a basic book report.

Evaluating memoir-based assignments can also be puzzling. One student e-mailed to ask me why the book reaction papers had to

be properly written since the material and discussion preceding the assignment reminded her of her neighborhood book group and they would make no such demands. This was certainly the down side of

trying to integrate teaching and popular trends. Needless to say, instructors should articulate and maintain their grading standards despite the familiar nature of some of the tasks.

Other Caveats

No technique is perfect and teaching through memoirs has yielded several problematic issues, many of which can be overcome if addressed before or early in the semester. For example, it is important to note that some of these books are quite popular and may be available in other formats. One of my selections, The Broken Cord, was made into a widely seen TV movie with actor Jimmy Smits in 1992 (Jones & Stone, 1997). If an instructor does not look into these possibilities before implementation, there may be an unintended "Cliff Notes effect" which will undermine many of the instructional goals.

Availability is important. A memoir is not a textbook but it should be ordered as if it is one. Even in areas with many bookstores and libraries, one or two classes can create a tremendous demand. In the same vein, some books go out of print quickly. Many publishers have web sites and/or phone representatives who are happy to address this question.

As a final note, since these books are real life accounts, they are subject to real life controversy and outcomes. Michael Dorris, groundbreaking crusader for the prevention of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and award-winning author of The Broken Cord, committed suicide amidst charges of sexual abuse of his children (Jones & Stone, 1997). More recently, the veracity of one of the most popular memoirs on American campuses, I, Rigoberta Menchu, was very seriously and publicly challenged (Wilson, 1999). Whether information and later developments are provided by the instructor or searched out by students, it is best to be familiar with them.

Comments from Students

Pre- and in-service teachers from two large suburban colleges where I have taught with memoirs from were asked to provide comments and suggestions on this method. Many used this opportunity to describe their feelings about the memoirs. For example, one student commented "I loved reading Let Me Hear Your Voice Maurice (the author) gave a beautiful description from start to finish about finding a therapy that would help her children." Another wrote, "I enjoyed The Broken Cord. I think it was valuable in its slap in the face, way of making us look at reality."

Other participants wrote to praise the memoir as a vehicle for learning. "I really liked reading the book Let Me Hear Your Voice. It gives a different perspective on the topic (autism) since it is written by a mother of a child who has gone through the experience rather than a doctor's or clinician's perspective. It made learning about autism easier since one feels that they are going through this experience with the author." Another commented, "It really taught me a great deal and made me want to learn more. I've never felt that way about info from a text."

Memoirs can also have an impact well beyond your classroom. Many students passed the assigned book along to others as evidenced by notes like "I'm recommending the book" and "My sister and mother are reading the book now."

Discussion

Memoirs are multiplying in the new millennium as people are grappling with their need to understand themselves and others. Faculty can use these works to meet these needs by building empathy and insight among students through the accessible and extraordinary portrayal of the lives of disabled children. Such things are not easily acquired through textbooks and journal articles.

It is especially helpful that most memoirs offer information about children and their families. The family is an indisputably important force in the life of a child. Every year school systems expend considerable effort to involve parents in their child's educational program. Federal and state laws mandate parent involvement for students with disabilities. Yet teacher education programs spend little time preparing students to work with this population. Memoirs can begin to remedy this problem.

Memoirs can be used in nearly any college class in any department but they are especially relevant to teacher education. It is teachers who carry with them the attitudes and models of thinking that will, in turn, create the next generation of learners. In addition, it is incumbent upon faculty to model the utilization of innovative methods so that students will be encouraged to develop and utilize new pedagogy in their own classrooms. Teaching through memoirs allows faculty to intervene on many levels and perhaps, have a hand in creating future generations of students.

In future implementation, the method can be modified to meet the needs of different students. Some instructors may want to put a greater emphasis on group process. Integrating several works both within and across genres is a possibility. For faculty members who are short on time, short stories or excerpts can be used. Readings can be followed up with observations of disabled students in different classrooms. One semester I was fortunate enough to have a parent of an autistic child volunteer to come to class and discuss her experiences. Memoirs may also serve as a prelude to journal writing, a popular method for building self-reflection among students in teacher education programs.

Education for genuine understanding is difficult and in some ways a technical enterprise calling for specific teaching tools (Haas & Keeley, 1998). The pedagogical use of memoirs is one of the tools that can help teachers reach new levels of thinking, learning, and communicating in their classrooms and ours.

Conclusion

In the past schools have operated according to a dual system with separate general and special education classrooms. These days are over and while inclusion is no longer a novel idea, it still poses immense challenges to teachers and teacher educators. Universities are offering more unified training programs and general and special educators now sit together in class much like their students. Teaching with memoirs, including group discussion and writing assignments, is a personal and practical way to broaden the horizons of both groups of educators and prepare them for the redefinition of roles and revolution of ideas associated with inclusion.

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