

Asking “Who Am I?”

Sarah E. Schoper, PhD, Western Illinois University, Jennifer E. Sanders, University of Missouri, Brent Ploughe, Bentley University

Authors’ Contact Information

Sarah E. Schoper, PhD
Assistant Professor, Educational and Interdisciplinary Studies
Western Illinois University
115B Horrabin Hall, Macomb, IL, 61455
Phone: 309-298-1183
Email: se-schoper@wiu.edu

Jennifer E. Sanders
University of Missouri
C122 Pershing Hall, Columbia, MO, 65211
Phone: 573-882-3962
Email: sandersjenni@missouri.edu

Brent Ploughe
Bentley University
175 Forest St., Waltham, MA, 02452
Phone: 781-891-2149
Email: bploughe@bentley.edu

Abstract:

Incorporating the question “Who am I?” into the classroom environment through one’s pedagogy has potential to powerfully influence the learning process for both instructor and students. Reflections of a new faculty member and two of her graduate students experiencing the integration of this question into the learning environment are offered in this personal reflection piece. Through the narratives shared the personal, yet transformative, nature of the question, “Who am I?”, is explored in such a way that the other questions and insights connected to the question begin to surface. The shared narratives also allow for the growth of the instructor and students to begin emerging.

Key Words:

faculty member, graduate student, learning process, reflection, learning, identity, epistemological, lived experiences.

Introduction

Once, at a diversity institute, I heard Pedro Noguera (2012) say that, “in order to help students learn you have to know who they are.” What struck me about this

statement, besides its congruency with my beliefs about helping students learning, was that it left out the requirement to also know who I am. In my experience, the reflective question "Who am I?" is often overlooked in the classroom. In classical history, Socrates is often credited with recommending self-knowledge to his students, but emphasis is not usually given to the teacher also needing such self-knowledge. Instead, the messages I receive as a new faculty member are primarily about the need to clearly articulate course content without weight to how well I know myself, or if I am being honest, how well my students know themselves. Yet, the importance of reflecting on one's self to the learning process is not a new concept (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow & Associates, 2000; Zull, 2002). It is this process, focused on the question "Who am I?" that serves as the framework for exploring my experience as a new faculty member, as well as the experiences of two recent master's degree graduates on the receiving end of that question in my classroom. Specifically, the students experienced two classroom environments in which I asked them, through weekly and semester long reflective journaling, to consider the question "Who am I?" in relation to the course concepts they were putting into practice within their administrative positions.

A Faculty Perspective

Baxter Magolda (2001) identified the question "Who am I?" as central to the learning process. According to her research, individuals are asked to consider their own self as they make meaning of their experiences through the process of responding to the question "Who am I?" Thus, the question deepens the learning process, moving it beyond simply transferring information to a person toward involving reflection as to how one is coming to understand.

The question "Who am I?" is fundamental to my pedagogy, with a belief that students come to explore this question uniquely for themselves related to the specific course content. Simply put, I believe students learn through acquiring new knowledge and linking that knowledge to their lived experiences. Drawing attention to the question "Who am I?" in addition to other course content is not easy; there is no one formula. The experience is more akin to being with students on a journey with roadblocks, unexpected turns, and hidden patches of warm sunshine. Often it results in asking epistemological questions during class discussions, in giving feedback, and through the structure of class assignments. It also means acknowledging my own journey related to the question "Who am I?" which is often uncomfortable, humbling, and demanding as I increasingly learn how the identities, histories, and behaviors I bring add complexity to the teacher-student relationship.

For example, I discovered in my first year of teaching that it is especially challenging to encourage students to explore who they are when they are conditioned to look outside of themselves for answers. As a new faculty member, I witnessed the ease with which I could, and can, tell students not only the course content, but also what it should mean for who they are, and my experience is that quite often they would accept my thoughts without question. Yet, the question "Who am I?" causes me to be uncomfortable claiming such supremacy. I cannot and will not be there to provide answers to students as they navigate through life experiences. If I set up an environment in which students are dependent upon me for their knowledge, I am only

validating myself. Yes, there is content to be learned, but the question “Who am I?” helps remind me that I want to figure it out with them—not for them—and that it will be messy. In this way, together we are learning not only the course content, but also how the course content came to be and how it can continue to be expanded.

Additionally, I see the action of telling students what they should think of the course material as a mechanism for silencing their unique experiences in the world. Ironically, silencing myself from telling them what they should be thinking is one of the most powerful methods I know of to get students to explore and consider their own thoughts related to and about course content. It also leads to a variety of strong reactions from students.

Frustration is one of the more powerful emotions students share when I ask them to recognize their thoughts and consider how they are coming to them. I see the temptation to ease their frustration by seizing my role and creating a classroom environment in which I tell them the meaning they should be making without valuing how that meaning came to be. It is by no means easy to be with students in such moments, and I often question if I should just give in by telling them what to think. What is my role in helping students feel comfortable as they learn in my classes? Is there something wrong with my teaching? In these moments reflecting on the question “Who am I?” helps put in perspective and process through the students’ reactions as they actively try out what they are learning. The question “Who am I?” helps me recognize that learning is hard, assists me in finding patience as students come to learn what is not longer new to me, and helps me expand my capacity to help students learn.

A Graduate’s Perspective

In my second year of graduate school, the question, “Who am I?” surfaced in classes with the arrival of a new faculty member. Upon entering graduate school, I was quick to offer my thoughts as they related to the course material, which were almost always the same as the authors’ in the assigned readings, with little to no connection to my own experiences. Such a process brought me success while an undergraduate student, so why alter it? I constructed language that left little room for my own contributions to classroom discussions, or even awareness of my own thoughts. If classmates’ thoughts were incongruent with the authors’ comments, I did not hesitate to tell them they were wrong. I viewed inconsistencies in others’ thoughts with the authors we read as direct attacks on me as a person, unaware that who I was derived from the thoughts of the authors without consideration to my lived experiences.

In my third semester the question, “Who am I?” became more of a focal point and began to change how I made sense of the world. At the time, it felt like I no longer recognized myself. I recall knowing that this question meant surfacing past experiences and determining for myself what they meant for what I was learning. Yet, I also felt motivated to learn more about both the subject matter and me.

One significant moment for me came during a course in which I wrote weekly-guided reflections. For example, one question asked, “What did your experience and observations this week make you reflect upon?” At first, this question seemed easy. I wrote to my professor telling her about what I thought of that week. The following week, I received my journal back with myriad of questions asking me how I came to have the

thoughts I shared. In reflecting on the questions posed, I began moving away from repeating what I knew from others and moving toward how I came to my conclusions, and the only way I knew to do that was to look internally and consider who I am. This process was not easy, and continues today.

Another Graduate’s Perspective

Asking, “Who am I?” unraveled my sense of self from the very core. In my second year of graduate school, I least expected that this question would profoundly alter my relationship with my practice, my environment, and myself. That I still cannot fashion a clear, concise response to the question “Who am I?” is evidence, to me, of its value and importance for me, as well as with those with whom I communicate and interact.

For me, how I experienced the question “Who am I?” greatly challenged my relationship to and with my racial identity. For many years, my learned conception of Black identity comprised a barrier to overcome, not a characteristic to embrace. My identity rested wholly in individual family membership, faith, and education attainment. In my mental and emotional framework, each of those contradicted what I understood as Black culture and experience. I performed well in predominantly White environments and aligned my life as closely as possible to what I envisioned as the wholesome “American” family. To say that I was passively unaware of the impact of being Black would be a misrepresentation. I actively pursued a lifestyle that attempted to divert others’ from “seeing” me in that way, shielding me from perceived impacts of that association.

In graduate school, I intellectually discussed Black experiences just as I did experiences for White, Latino, or Asian. However, also considering my core assumptions, beliefs, and accepted norms through the question “Who Am I?” created dissonance with that manufactured objectivity. Written and verbal reflection in the structure of assignments allowed me to view how my interpretation of the world influenced my capacity to see and hear others. As my second year progressed, “Who am I?” deconstructed how I considered knowledge and how learning occurred. Even now, “Who am I?” continues to open my senses to my surroundings and my understanding of others. In it I see myself but through it I also see others and the world.

Conclusion

As a new faculty member, and as surfaced in the reflections of two graduate students who took my courses, involving the question “Who am I?” through pedagogy in the classroom powerfully engaged students in the learning process. The aforementioned student narratives illustrate the potential of the question to deepen students’ ability to understand and build connections between course material and their lived experiences. Asking the question, “Who am I?”, as demonstrated through my narrative, can also involve more deeply the faculty member in their own learning process regarding how they are fostering student learning.

References

- Baxter Magolda, M.B. 2001. Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development. Sterling: Stylus.
- Kolb, D. 1984. Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Mezirow, J., & Associates. (2000). Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Noguera, P. “Demographic transformation and its consequences” (presentation, 19th Annual Dealing with Difference Institute, Macomb, IL, May 15, 2012.
- Zull, J. E. (2002). *The art of changing the brain*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing