

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: USING HUMANIZING PEDAGOGY TO RE-VISE THE POETRY WRITING WORKSHOP: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ABOUT EXPLORATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF SELF

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This study explores my engagement with a humanizing pedagogy in a culturally diverse high school poetry classroom. Students' ideas, thoughts, feelings, and need for self expression have been marginalized or silenced, and depending on their access to race, class, and gender privilege the marginalization becomes more or less intense. Given that problem, studying students' experiences of poetry in my classroom through an action research study became my theoretical, pedagogical and methodological focus for my dissertation. I used action research as a methodological tool to study my teaching and develop richer understandings of students' lives and experiences. In researching my own poetry classroom, I was able to transform my teaching. I found out that poetry taught in humanizing ways had the potential to engage students in critical reflection about their own lives. I learned that students could carve out self-images that they found empowering and begin to recognize their agency in their lives. My students established human connections with each other and with, which allowed a loving, critical dialogue to take place. My classroom became a place where students could empower themselves through lived classroom experiences. In this study, I documented and examined the journey toward self expression, self love, critical literacy, and transformation that my

students embarked. This study provides an insider view of poetry instruction, in terms of curriculum design, pedagogy, poem selection, and teacher-student relationships. This study offers insight, not only for poetry teachers and action researchers, but also for educational policy makers, who need to revise curriculum in order to alienate fewer students.

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WORKSHOP: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ABOUT EXPLORATION AND
TRANSFORMATION OF SELF

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DEDICATION

To my wife Cherice Daniel:
Thanks for watching the boys!

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I would like to thank Dr. Price for his years of shaping me. I want to thank Barbara Arnold for her tireless proofreading efforts. I also want to acknowledge my parents and sister who received their doctorates before me which served as my eternal motivation.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Over the last eight years that I have been teaching, I have witnessed public schools become more and more restrictive to students due to changes in our national security, school security, and curriculum security (due to the national demand for more standards and more testing). Student-centered curricula have been less of a priority than assessments and standards-based curriculum in public schools. Students I have taught have had little to no voice in their education. In many ways, the youth of today have become the “abandoned generation”.¹ Students’ ideas, thoughts, feelings, and needs for self expression have been marginalized or silenced. Depending on a student’s race, class, and gender privilege, the marginalization becomes more or less intense.

Studying students’ experiences of poetry in my classroom, through an action research study, seemed an obvious theoretical, pedagogical and methodological focus for my dissertation. In researching my own poetry classroom I had several key goals: First, I wanted to be a better teacher by helping my students experience the kind of poetry writing workshop I received later in life, instead of the alienating poetry workshops and instruction I received in high school and they often encountered. Second, I wanted to understand how a humanizing pedagogy could be used to reform traditional poetry workshops that I found to be alienating and disempowering. I was curious as to whether poetry taught in humanizing ways had the potential to engage students in critical reflection about their own lives. Third, I hoped that students could carve out self-images that they found empowering and begin to recognize their agency in their lives. Next, I desired to understand how writing poetry inside a humanizing pedagogy could be an

¹ Giroux 2003.

important untapped resource to address student alienation. I also wanted my students to have a place in school where they felt central to, rather than marginalized from, the written and lived curriculum. I needed my students to establish human connections with each other and with me rather than experience isolation or estrangement. I hoped these approaches might provide my students incentive to invest themselves (hearts and minds) into our learning experience, rather than remain distant, apathetic or skeptical about what I was teaching. Finally, I wanted my classroom to be a place where students could empower themselves through lived classroom experiences.

In the ensuing chapters, I document and examine the journey toward self expression, self love, critical literacy, and transformation on which my students embarked. My work contributes towards literature on teaching poetry in a number of ways. It provides insight into the teaching of poetry that goes beyond mere listing of exercises. The praxis of humanizing pedagogy can be expanded by exploring poetry, which needs revisions to its traditional instruction. As there is little empirical work that focuses on student and teacher growth as humans within a curriculum, and virtually none dealing explicitly with poetry and student's lives, this study hopefully will contribute to scholarship about making high school experiences and poetry curriculum more meaningful to students' lives.

This study provides an insider view of poetry instruction, in terms of curriculum design, pedagogy, poem selection, and teacher-student relationships. This study offers insight, not only for poetry teachers and action researchers, but also for educational policy makers, who need to revise curriculum in order to alienate fewer students. Finally, this study sheds light on student empowerment and the ability of students to be change

agents for themselves and their immediate surroundings, which may provide more insight into the alienation of high school students.

Understanding and Transforming the Self through Poetry

Important to this study is an examination of the role of poetry as a vehicle for student growth. Engaging in ‘poetry’, includes not only students writing poetry, it also involves students reading and dialoging about each others’ poetry, as well as engaging with me as their teacher through my comments on their poetry and one-on-one discussions about their poetry. In this study, poetry is more than the words on the page; it is the interaction and experiences sparked by those words on the page written by a particular human being. In this context, student growth becomes a complex process of understanding, accepting, redefining, and loving self; in a sense, growth was the process of students understanding their agency. This construct of agency is complicated for it entails an empowerment process, which involves realization of an oppressive state. Agency involves students working through disempowering factors in their lives, and moving to an empowered state of being in their lives and their worlds. This perspective on agency raises questions about my roles as a teacher in the classroom, the curriculum developed, and the nature of pedagogy that reflects my commitment to student agency. I call this pedagogy a humanizing pedagogy. Important dimensions to this construct of humanizing pedagogy are critical literacy, dialogue, love, and empowerment. At the same time, this study also focuses on my development as a teacher, a poetry teacher, a researcher, a theorist, and a human being. My interactions with my students about their poetry helped transform me by the end of the class. In short, this study is about the

human interaction and bonds formed around poetry and how teacher and students were able to develop from our shared and lived classroom experiences.

My perspective of humanizing poetry is grounded in critical literacy, which is about coming to a critical understanding of self and understanding the self in relation to society². It is about learning to read the self and the world around you.³ In a way, this study reveals my evolving understandings of critical literacy pedagogy. Reflecting back on the class, I realize that being critically literate in my poetry classroom was a process. The process began with an articulation of an image of self. It required the ability to think critically about and problematize that image of self by looking for the potentially disempowering aspects of that image. The critically literate process included the capacity to conceive of new possible self images, the willingness to try out and live new images, and finally the courage to adopt more powerful images of self. Though the individual was the focus, my students and I could only come to understand our selves within the particular social contexts of our various lives, homes, school, communities, peers, and society.

Student poetry was the vehicle for this exploration and analysis of self to take place. My students wrote about themselves and about themselves in relation to their worlds, then we dialogued about their work and lives. Critical literacy became part of my humanizing pedagogy because, as a lived experience, it provided us with the opportunity to better understand ourselves and become more fully human. My love for students aided my teaching in a critical literacy writing workshop because my knowledge of my

² Christensen 2000.

³ Freire 1998.

students, which emerged from our strong relationships, helped me better understand how to challenge their thinking as I commented on their work.

Addressing Student Alienation

Despite being a poet, English teacher and poetry teacher, my own feelings of alienation associated with poetry in schools helped push me to conduct this study on the teaching of poetry in a high school setting. My first memories of poetry were in high school during the late 80's, where teachers asked me to write poems in various forms like the sonnet or villanelle, and on various topics like lists of things that make us happy or trees. This form of poetry instruction left me unable to express any real feelings, thoughts, or my own voice. By voice, I mean the original style and presence for which every writer searches. I was being asked to complete a task for the teacher, who subsequently had ownership of the work. After all, it was the teacher's assignment, the teacher's choice, the teacher's class, and thus the teacher's poem. To say I felt alienated would be an understatement. Though there has been much debate over the term alienation,⁴ I define it like Hoy⁵ as feelings of marginalization, isolation, estrangement, apathy, detachment, and powerlessness. As a student, I felt I had nothing at stake in the classroom, because nothing was for me, and everything was for the teacher. This traditional writing instruction silenced me in much the same way as other educators have noted traditional pedagogy silences students in schools⁶. My goal was to construct a poetry classroom where my students would not have to experience feelings of alienation that I had to endure in school. Many researchers have documented what happens to

⁴ See Phoenix 1974 for a historical accounting of philosophers like Calvin, Plato, Hegel, Freud, and Marx for grounding in the various definitions of the term alienation.

⁵ Hoy 1971.

⁶ Everhart 1983, Freire 1985 and Waller 1932.

students who feel alienated by schools. Many students disengaged in school activities and courses, and engaged in violent and destructive behavior⁷. Many students chose to drop out of school rather than continue to deal with feelings of alienation.⁸ Many students became disruptive within the school and faced suspensions and expulsions. Fortunately, my feelings of alienation didn't manifest in poor grades or attendance because I was afraid of my parents' wrath. Unfortunately, they did manifest themselves in discipline problems and confrontations with teachers about my role in their classroom. I attempted to make my poetry classroom a place where teacher and student shared experiences and were active participants in dialogues geared at our mutual human development. Later on, I will discuss the reasons why my students found my class to be far from alienating and how their need and gratitude for my pedagogical approach helped transform my identity as a teacher.

Love, Dialogue and Alienation

A major dimension of the humanizing pedagogy I developed over the year long poetry course was coming to love my students. This study was not about the mere feeling of love. I argue that once a teacher builds relationships with students and comes to love them, the teacher must act on that love by shaping curriculum and pedagogy for those particular students' best interest. *Love* in this study was partnered with critical literacy, dialogue, empowerment, and the teaching of poetry itself in order to ground my students' needs and best interests in curriculum and pedagogical construction. Part of my humanizing pedagogy for my students in this study was to validate the various parts of themselves that they chose to share with me in their writing. This was an example of

⁷ Natriello 1982.

⁸ See Peng 1983 for studies about students elected to drop out of school.

acting on my love for students. Validating and loving my students was problematized in this class by my need to challenge and push students in their images of self they articulated in their poetry. What loving students means, entails, and how love develops over time are discussed in the data analysis chapters.

A major reason loving and validating students became a major focus in my class was because I was interested in student alienation issues and I had experienced the same type of alienation my students wrote about. I did not receive love or validation in my own poetry classes, which contributed to my feelings of alienation. In the traditional workshops I attended after high school, enormous emphasis was placed on the style, poetic devices, line breaks, and shapes my poems took on the page, but to my surprise no time was dedicated to the content of the poems and the messages in them. I was starved for dialogue about my poems. The majority of my college writing experience, much like high school, was spent feeling isolated and as if something was wrong with me for writing about my experiences. I couldn't figure out why I was being silenced at the highest levels of poetry instruction. What was the point of putting yourself on the page only to be rejected or ignored time and time again?

In this study, I analyzed the dialogue between teacher and student. Getting students to talk and express themselves was only the first step in the dialogue process. I looked at the pedagogical changes I had to make as a result of the information gained from dialogues with students. Dialogue was also examined as a vehicle for validating students and for expressing love to students. Dialogues between myself and individual students were examined as part of the transformation of self process. I discuss the type of dialogue and goals for dialogue in the ensuing chapter.

Humanizing the Writing Workshop

Due to fact that the traditional writing workshops had not worked for my students in the past, I had to construct a poetry workshop experience that seemed more humanizing for my students. The need for the writing workshop in the teaching of poetry is not really one of debate. Most poets and poetry teachers agree on the three pronged approach, in which a student must read poetry, hear or speak poetry, and write poetry in order to fully understand poetry. Some have tried to add a fourth part, which is the visualization of poetry, but most people would skip it because they argue that visualization takes place while the poem is read or heard. In the traditional writing workshop, the students write poems, the class reads them, then critiques the poems, followed by the expert teacher's words of wisdom for revision. This Iowa workshop pattern has been criticized by for several reasons: forcing conformity, teaching craft not art, and having a dominate voice (father) speaking. This patriarchal role was a role that I struggled against throughout the class in my attempt to form loving relationships with all fifteen of my students in the class.

The traditional form of workshop focuses on the product (the best possible poem), not the process of writing and how the writing can be a vehicle for transformation, which can dehumanize the writing process and the writer. I did not want my students to have to endure this type of workshop experience. I wanted a poetry class where all students writing was validated, rather than the traditional workshop where the shared experience and equality of all writing styles is limited.⁹ Only the teacher-driven view of good stands and too many students' ideas are left in the margins, like mine were throughout college and most of graduate school workshops. Instead of the writing workshop being a place

⁹ For a longer critique of the traditional poetry workshop see Green 1993.

for the disruption of traditional patterns of discourse¹⁰, the workshop merely continued traditional discourse. By encouraging my students to write about self and then critically reflect on the images of themselves they articulated, we were attempting to disrupt the disempowering discourse about them that was crippling them.

Finally, to get students started, teachers in the traditional poetry workshop often used numerous methods like clippings, forms, emulation, list poems, acrostics, found poems, recording dreams, and other writing exercises. Poetry was taught as if it were a foreign entity that a student had to trick into showing up on their paper, which led to real ownership problems. I did not believe that this was the type of poetry instruction that could lead to personal transformation. In the poetry class for this study, I did not give students writing assignments; instead I gave them the freedom to write about whatever they wanted to because I respected them as humans with a wealth of knowledge and experiences. I did not want my students using poetry as a writing exercise, but as a vehicle for the exploration of self and personal growth. I wanted their poetry and more importantly their lives to dominate our class, so that my students may have a sense of ownership over the poetry they wrote for the class and ownership for the class itself.

The only model of a non-traditional writing workshop I had to draw from was Cave Canem, which was the first nation wide workshop for young black poets. Each teacher was a famous poet, but rather than make students replicate their voice or style, they gave students the freedom to create, pursue, and master their own styles and voices. I remember and thank Toi Derricotte, who showed me that poetry could be a vehicle to express my real thoughts and emotions about how I saw the world, and how the world treated me. Poetry became important to my life because I could own and use it to

¹⁰ Cazden 1986.

understand my life, and my place in the world. At Cave Canem, each poet was encouraged to write about what ever they needed to write about, and was promised a receptive and supportive audience, who would show sympathy, empathy, and provide nurturing and dialogue. The lived experience showed me that poetry was necessary, and could be a very powerful tool if taught properly. Cave Canem planted the seeds for my humanizing pedagogy, but I had never taught a workshop myself, so I did not know how to help students experience the empowerment I felt in a poetry class. This study was my attempt to create a similar empowering experience for high school students

Transforming Poets not Poems:

Empowerment, Poetry and Humanizing Pedagogy

The best way to illustrate the significance of humanizing the teaching of poetry, so that poetry can be used as a tool for empowerment is through two short vignettes about my first experiences teaching poetry. In the first story, I reveal how I made the mistake of privileging the poem not the poet just as the traditional writing workshops had taught me. My first chance to teach poetry came at the University of Maryland. The university setting gave me the freedom to design my own curriculum, which allowed the students more freedom to be creative. My students were freed from forced forms, poetic exercises, and trying to replicate a style or please a teacher. I let them write for themselves, and to the audiences they needed to address. We read and critiqued poems for artistic merit, and poetic perfection, but only to enhance the student's intended message and points. We had open dialogue in which we challenged sexist notions, dealt with issues of religion, sexuality, and race relations. The students expressed true gratitude in their teacher evaluations, and left my class needing to write more poetry.

However, something was missing. I succeeded in creating a place where ideas could be shared and discussed and all poetry was welcomed and validated, but to what end? In many ways, I was still only helping my students write the best possible poem. I did not realize at the time that what was missing was helping my students become the best possible person they could through the writing and discussion of their poetry. I focused on the poem not the person. I also realize looking back at that class that I devoted so much of my time and energy to their poetry that I spent too little time coming to know my students and developing relationships with them. I knew their poetry, but not them. They knew how I felt their poems could improve, but not how I felt about anything else in life. In this study, a major transition I made was developing ways to change my written comments on student poetry to help particular students improve their lives not just their poems. I attempted to become a more humanizing teacher by privileging humanity over poetry, which entailed expanding the purpose for poetry. The writing of poetry and the subsequent dialogue that emerged from that poetry was analyzed as an important piece of an empowerment process. In the ensuing chapters, I reveal that poetry can be a vehicle for students to realize the potentially disempowering nature of the ideas and images they have chosen in their lives. After their realization, the empowerment process continued with students examining alternative possibilities, experiencing hope, and exercising their own agency.

The second story takes me back to 1997, when I got what I thought was going to be the opportunity of a life time. I was employed as an English teacher in a large school district within the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. I got to teach poetry in an Advanced Composition writing workshop course, which was an elective course with no

concrete curriculum or mandatory texts. Students took the course because they were interested in writing. The freedom to design curriculum helped me get back to the joys of teaching that I experienced while teaching college. I could select texts based on individual student needs, interests, and issues raised in class discussions. However, I failed to do so and only selected texts that I knew and enjoyed because I had to have a syllabus on the first day of school. I failed to make my students' lives central to my curriculum. I was a novice teacher and believed that following the curriculum guide was the most central influence on my teaching. From this study, I found that I needed the courage to allow curriculum and pedagogy to emerge from the real life needs of my students. In the class I researched, my students were struggling with issues of agency and empowerment, so I attempted to address those issues through my teaching of poetry. Rather than allowing my pedagogy to be driven by forces outside of our classroom context, I allowed my students' lives to drive curriculum and ultimately my pedagogy, which transformed my understandings of teaching and my teaching itself. In the empowerment chapters, I draw heavily upon the work of Freire. My classroom experiences helped me come to understand his work better because I had a lived experience, which contextualized his theories for me.

Overview

In Chapter Two, I discuss literature pertinent to this study and explain the ideas and theories that informed my teaching, approaches to poetry, pedagogy and data analysis. In this review, I am careful to point out my initial understandings of various theories and ideologies, which I only came to own and understand as I taught my class. My students' particular feelings of alienation and disempowerment are what helped move

those words from abstract terms to part of my reality as a teacher. My students' lack of self love and our loving relationships, which helped me better understand issues of love in teaching. It was their specific writing process and our group poetry discussions that helped my understandings of critical literacy emerge from the ideas and strategies I read about.

In Chapter Three, I provide a rationale for why I chose a qualitative action research methodology for a study focusing on humanizing teaching. I address validity issues related to a teacher studying his own practice. After brief explanations of the school, students, and troubles I had gaining access, I discuss the metamorphosis of my research questions. Finally, I provide insight into the challenges I faced during data collection and analysis, and the procedures I used to manage the tremendous paper load and isolating research environment.

In Chapter Four, I provide a first look at my students at the beginning of the class. In this chapter, the focus turns to the negative self-images that my students revealed to me in their beginning of the class letters, their initial poems, our initial group discussions and one-on-one conversations. I found the images my students presented to be problematic and made the choice to adjust my curriculum and pedagogy to help them critically reflect on their self-images and begin the long arduous journey toward transformation. Part of what helped me have the courage to focus the course around my students' lives was the loving relationships that I developed over time with my students.

Chapter Five takes a closer look at love and dialogue, which emerged as two major components of my humanizing pedagogy. The chapter first examines students' lack of self love and how my love for them moved me into classroom action. I then

examine how letter writing emerged into a critical component in the course. Though letters were written to all students, the chapter focuses on a few students and how the dialogic process worked for those students.

Chapter Six focuses on the various ways I tried to challenge disempowering images, ideas, beliefs, and constructs my students' articulated. Creating opportunities for empowerment became another component of humanizing pedagogy. I closely examine student poetry and how my comments to them about their poetry were intended to provide opportunities for empowerment. Since empowerment was a long and complex process, I provide a case of a female student that reveals the intricacies of the process engaged in by each student and me.

Chapter Seven's primary goal is to allow the students to voice for themselves the transformations that they believed they experienced. This was done through an examination of the letters they wrote to me at the end of the course. I answered each letter and attempted to address issues of agency, empowerment, validation and love for my students, in an effort to make sure that the learning we did together could continue outside the classroom. I also focus on how the letters they wrote to me helped me to realize my own transformations resulting from the class.

In the concluding chapter, I share new understandings that I developed about teaching, teaching poetry, dialogue in teaching, love and relationship building, empowerment and agency, student centered teaching, and critical literacy. The understandings I present in the conclusion are a result of a lived experience inside a humanizing classroom and a benefit from having spent an entire year researching my own teaching.

CHAPTER II

Theoretical Underpinnings of My Humanizing Pedagogy

Introduction

This chapter explores the theories and theorists that influenced my formulation of a humanizing pedagogy within my poetry classroom. I used these ideas to ground my practice, and in turn my practice later helped me better understand and come to own many of these concepts. As stated earlier, the dimensions of my humanizing pedagogy were critical literacy, dialogue, empowerment, and love. I begin with critical literacy because I used it as a stance to revise the traditional writing workshop that I and my students found to be alienating. Teaching students to actively engage in understanding the self and our relationships to society required me to rethink the importance and roles of dialogue in my classroom. My students revealed numerous problems to me through their poems and our dialogue about their poems. The major problem was their lack of agency and disempowering thoughts, beliefs, images, about themselves and their worlds. I needed to draw from empowerment and feminist literature to address these issues. The driving force for helping students develop their critical consciousness, agency, and a love of self was my love for my students, so this chapter also explores the necessity of love in my teaching.

Critical Literacy Stance and Humanizing Pedagogy in My Poetry Classroom

In this section, I argue that the traditional teaching stance and the traditional writing workshop need to be revised if student alienation and humanness are concerns for educators. While I agree with Lensmire's¹¹ call for the writing workshop teacher to have a non-neutral stance, and do in many ways appreciate the stance he advocates, I believe

¹¹ Lensmire 1994

that his critically pragmatic stance is not strong enough to combat issues of inequality, social justice, and student alienation. A more proactive and critical stance may be necessary. Calling attention to these issues and helping students see and appreciate differences is not enough. Transformation, liberation, and empowerment cannot occur if the teacher settles for mere mentioning and pointing out these critical issues. The most productive pedagogical stance to take is a humanizing one that connects to the ideas of critical literacy.

The traditional writing workshop, like schools, is in need of revision because it has a sterile protocol that has the capacity to further alienate and marginalize student participants. Some of the most important ideas about revising the writing workshop came from Lensmire's work in his third grade classroom¹². Lensmire offers an image of the writing workshop that contradicts the more romantic and positive success stories about the writing workshop that teachers are more familiar with.¹³ His revision of the writing workshop moved the workshop away from just being a process (draft, revise, edit, publish)¹⁴ where the individual is valued in isolation, and the teacher is a neutral respondent. In his writing workshop class, he noticed that due to peer dynamics, students' intentions in their writing are not always nice and their written comments to each other can be very disempowering to other students in the class, by violating trusts, and silencing voices. Given the potential for harm, and the possibility of racist, sexist and other harmful writing to go unchallenged, Lensmire argues that the teacher can not be neutral as the traditional workshop would have them. The neutral stance is not a

¹² Lensmire 1994

¹³ Graves 1983, Calkins 1986, Murray 1968.

¹⁴ Applebee 1986.

humanizing stance because the teacher is not obligated to confront problematic issues in the classroom.

There are numerous examples of the neutral teacher stance to which Lensmire and I would object. First, the deductive reasoning stance in writing workshops is where teachers have students reason from what they know in a text and move to what they don't know. The problem with this method is that it seems to limit in-depth discussions because it transforms the dialogue process into a technical reasoning process as opposed to a personal creative process, which would be more humanizing. A second stance that uncovers the problems of the neutral teacher stance is the popular theory that the poem means whatever a student thinks it means. This neutral teacher approach cuts off dialogue and communication by allowing individuals to hold fast to flawed thinking and feel no need to ever change or develop their world view. I could not afford this stance in my class because I was trying to challenge student thinking and not allow them to remain stagnate.

A third neutral teaching stance places the teacher in a position of having the 'right interpretation' of a poem. Numerous writers cite one of the major reasons for teacher neglect of poetry and student hatred of poetry as the fact that the teacher translates- forces- endorses a singular meaning of the poem to the students, who sit back and receive knowledge.¹⁵ I did not want to be in this role as a teacher because I found having to be all knowing to be a non-human role. Being all knowing also conflicted with two major goals in this study, one was for me to be a fellow learner and improve my teaching. The other was for poetry to be an active learning process, not a spoon fed process. I wanted my classroom instruction to "revolve around students, not sacred works, worshipped writers,

¹⁵ See Lott 1989 for a study on student responses to teachers "not" teaching poetry.

and definitive interpretations”¹⁶. When disempowered by having answers given to the student, students may turn away from poetry, rather than remain in an oppressed state, where they must be silent, ask no questions, and have no agency¹⁷. If poetry was to be a vehicle for personal transformation in the class, my students had to be empowered by the process of writing and coming to understand poetry.

Instead of the neutral teacher stance, Lensmire argues the teacher must maintain a critical stance, so as not to reinforce negatives and potentially harmful views by teacher silence about those views. Like Habermas¹⁸, Lensmire wanted to engage students in the politics of their text. In case all teachers don’t get the same successful and positive peer interactions as Atwell, Dyson, and Willinsky¹⁹, Lensmire suggests that teachers develop what he calls a critical stance. He suggest taking a critically pragmatic stance, which he borrowed from Cherryholmes²⁰, is a way of responding to student text in writing workshops by taking a look at the not just the aesthetic elements, but also the moral (both local-the class, and society), political (both local-the class, and society), and intellectual elements of their texts. The critical stance I selected for my goals was critical literacy.

Critical Literacy

The answer I was looking for, in response to Lensmire’s call for the workshop teacher to develop a strong non-neutral stance, was grounded in critical literacy, which was a more humanizing stance. A critical literacy stance can be utilized in the writing

¹⁶ Thomas 1988 page 19.

¹⁷ See Bugeja’s 1992 study about why students stop reading poetry.

¹⁸ Habermas 1984.

¹⁹ See Atwell 1987 or Willinsky 1991 for more on the positive aspects of peer interaction in the writing workshop.

²⁰ Cherryholmes 1988.

workshop to build community, promote dialogue, encourage critical thought, promote critical questions, and push towards change. Critical literacy is trying to move students beyond description of society toward an interrogation of society by questioning basic assumptions by engaging them in a study of their lives and relationship to that society.²¹ Critical literacy demands that students “question sources, look for assumptions, and read for intentions, not just facts and transform {information} for a new purpose.”²² The emphasis is on the active role students take with texts.

Literacy is about being able to read and write; critical literacy is exploration of reading and writing in terms of the social meanings reading and writing authorize or silence²³. Critical literacy can help those students traditionally ignored by society to achieve a higher literacy level by helping students become self critical about the history of one’s experiences²⁴. A goal of critical literacy is to make children’s interests central to how texts work and how texts work in their world²⁵. Comber²⁶ and most critical literacy advocates insist that texts were written for particular purposes, by particular people, and have consequences for their readers, producers and users. The teaching of literacy is never neutral, but always embraces a particular perspective. In my class, I guided students in investigating the purposes within the poetry texts of their classmates in order to help them critically reflect on themselves and their society.

Powell²⁷ argues that if students confront societal issues of power and dominance head on, teachers can promote democracy and shared decision making. Once this occurs,

²¹ Christensen 2000

²² Flowers et al. 1990 page 21.

²³ Gilbert 1993.

²⁴ Andrade &Morell 2000.

²⁵ Luke & Freebody 1997.

²⁶ Comber 1999.

²⁷ Powell et al 2001.

literacy instruction can empower and lead to transformative action. This is the type of transformation I wanted my students to have a chance at acquiring in my classroom. The drive to problematize learner's relationship to society and discovering ways to change is also what Freire²⁸ had in mind when he spoke of critical literacy. Because as Morgan notes "society is constantly in conflict over knowledge/power, but the contestants are unequally matched due to the historical power of some groups, so a critical literacy stance looks to restructure by looking at language, the cultural and ideological assumptions behind texts, political representations, interrogating the inequitable, and positioning readers within discourses." Morgan continues, and argues that "these activities make for a more adequate and accurate reading of the world with all of its power imbalances and predispositions, which makes re-writing that world easier."²⁹ To get a clearer understanding of critical literacy in this particular context, I will explain what my students and I as the teacher did in our critical literacy classroom.

Students in my critically literate writing workshop were encouraged to learn how to do several things to respond to the work of their peers. Beyond thinking critically, they must also move toward "...social action, built on the understanding that literacy positions individuals and, in doing so, serves some more than others."³⁰ The question then, was what types of social action would my students engage in since critical literacy was in play in the class? Their social action came in response to censorship of their poetry, which will be discussed in chapter dealing with empowerment.

Students were asked to avoid reading in a social vacuum, but rather explore networks of power by looking for multiple meanings not single readings that serve power

²⁸ Freire 1989.

²⁹ Morgan 1997 page 19.

³⁰ Leland et al. 2000 page 26.

structures³¹. In addition to understanding the social historical context of text, Comber³² argues they must also: engage in local realities, research and analyze language practices and their effects, design texts with political and social intent and real world effects, speak and write texts which represent their rights and the rights of others, and produce alternate texts based on their readings. Powell adds that students must participate in democracy and practice freedom, justice, and equality. Finally, Christensen argues that “Students must use the tools of critical literacy to dismantle the half-truths, inaccuracies, and lies that strangle their conceptions about themselves, and others. They must use the tools of critical literacy to expose, to talk back to, and to remedy any act of injustice or intolerance that they witness.”³³ The talking back in my class was their oral responses to the poems of their peers. Each week of the class, students engaged in critical dialogue about the issues raised in their peers poems. Many of their dialogues are analyzed in the ensuing chapters as evidence of how critical literacy helped them address many half-truths and inaccuracies about their own lives and their own views of society.

Gee³⁴ also argues for students to write back to the text in order to do justice to the text and to continue the dialogue the writer began. After all of the empowering language, and ending of silences by the poets, critical literacy can help students engage with and join the poets’ struggle. My students were asked to consider numerous questions after reading a text to fully understand power differences, society, the way individuals and groups were viewed by society, and where the potential for change and

³¹ Gilbert 1993.

³² Comber 1999.

³³ Christensen 2000 page 6.

³⁴ Gee 1997.

transformation may be³⁵. Another important piece of data was what my students said to each other during discussions of peer poetry and the questions I asked to promote critical thinking and reflection.

The critical issues that the poet raises were less likely to be swept under the rug because the critical literacy writing workshop not only looks for all critical issues, but teases them out of texts as well. Critical literacy allows the students to tease out multiple meanings of their peers' poetry and respond to them in meaningful ways. I had to do numerous things to promote critical literacy when reading students' text. I had to constantly be on the look out for opportunities to address constructions of race, class, and gender, and identify social problems to use as curriculum. I had to teach to oppose dominant ideologies, break texts open, select, construct, and guide students' literacy opportunities³⁶. I also had to help student see that writing can be a vehicle for social empowerment by putting writing into action³⁷. I needed to mobilize students' knowledge and practice, engage students in socially perceptive reading, listening and viewing, and move them into their communities to re-connect and engage with the complex issues of every day life³⁸. I had to be willing to engage in the controversial, contemporary and sometimes volatile issues, and look at power and language of social institutions that may maintain inequality³⁹. In addition, I needed involve students' lives, culture, and language in the class, and provide openings for students to act on their knowledge through their writing⁴⁰. Finally, I had to promote an atmosphere where all

³⁵ See Leland, Comber, Powell, Morgan, and Moon for the types of questions students are supposed to ask in a critical literacy classroom.

³⁶ Lankshear & Knobel 1997.

³⁷ Gary 1988.

³⁸ Comber 1999.

³⁹ Gilbert 1993.

⁴⁰ Christensen 2000.

views were heard, help students communicate effectively with all people in a multicultural society, and help students find hidden agendas⁴¹. This study in many ways was about painting a clear picture of pedagogy in process. An interesting question was, given all of the social and individual requirements of critical literacy, could all of these elements be addressed in equal proportion in a classroom setting? As the class progressed, I realized the answer was no, and began to allow students' critical understanding of self to become the centerpiece because they demonstrated this as their greatest need in the beginning of the class.

There are numerous challenges to promoting critical literacy when reading students' text. Christensen⁴² argues that one of the biggest mistakes she made teaching literature was not questioning texts herself, which condones the views of the text. The burden on the teacher to notice inequity in the text is tremendous. How can students learn to read and question critically if their teacher is unaware of the critical issues? I had to avoid being insensitive to issues of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and economics. Sensitivity alone was not enough; I also had to have the courage to break silences about the issues if students did not detect them on their own. I came to learn that I also had to be sensitive to the other issues my students brought to the class. My students, as humans, came with their own questions about the inequities they saw in their own lives, which became my focal point when constructing comments on their poems. This was part of the reason that so much of the data analysis is focused on student poetry, my written comments, and most importantly, the ensuing transformations that our interactions encouraged.

⁴¹ Powell 2000.

⁴² Christensen 2000.

Gary⁴³ suggests that the abstract nature of oppressive language may serve as a barrier to critical literacy and empowering students. Students may not be able to conceptualize racism, sexism, and other discrimination when it comes to their own realities because they can't articulate it in language. I had to avoid speaking in general when it came to issues of oppression. It is a tremendous mistake to assume that everyone understands oppression in society and their own lives. Being specific with textual examples and helping students articulate their specific thoughts and experiences was the only way to prevent the classes own caricature of 'The racist, sexist, oppressive, white Man' as the source of the world's problems. Gary suggests focusing on students examining their own goals and compromises as they move into the adult world. He hopes teachers like me can help students unveil oppressive situations in their lives by guiding them through the writing of their selves. I wanted to be able to address the oppressions my students actually felt and actually conceptualize in their poetry, not just the social oppressions facing people similar to them in society at large. It was their real life understanding of oppression that I focused on in the class.

The final charges against critical literacy are just as serious. Allowing critical literacy to melt down into constant complaints, or a game where students simply point out everything that is wrong with the world, will depress students or make them too cynical. I cannot forget that seeing problems is not the end of critical literacy. I had to help students understand that reading and seeing problems were only the pre-requisite for them to become change agents and future leaders of society. The potential for action and change must be shown to students otherwise they will give up on the class, the school, society, and their own lives, which will further alienate them from the power structures.

⁴³ Gary 1988.

Throughout the study, I analyzed the language of hope and possibility I used when dialoging with my students.

Green⁴⁴ and numerous other critical literacy advocates have used the double edged sword metaphor to explain the potential enlightening, liberating, and empowering nature of texts, and the converse restrictive, dominating, and disempowering nature of texts. The texts selected in a curriculum can either uplift subordinate groups or maintain dominant group's power and the status quo. In a traditional writing workshop, this may be an issue as teachers select texts and give specific writing assignments. Since I allowed my students to write about their own issues and concerns, this pitfall may have been avoided, especially since I tried to allow equal time to as many students and their issues as possible. As long as I struggled against silencing some students, and the workshop used critical literacy practices on the poems, the restrictive, dominating, disempowering side of the literature sword could be dulled in my classroom.

Green also discusses the other major problem of a text failing to provide the basis for critical discussion to take place in the critical literacy classroom. Green, Gilbert, Gee and Luke⁴⁵ argue the texts must be of actual interest to students and contextualized by their experiences. There must be a variety of texts written for a variety of purposes, that students can use for their own needs and interests, otherwise how can students be expected to learn about the social context of language? Leland et al.⁴⁶ established a set of criteria for critical literacy classroom texts:

§ They don't just make difference visible, but rather explore what differences make a difference.

⁴⁴ Green 1993.

⁴⁵ Gee 1997 and Luke 1993

⁴⁶ Leland et al. 1999.

- § They enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who traditionally have been silenced or marginalized.
- § They show how people begin to take action on important social issues.
- § They explore, and think critically about dominant systems of meaning that operate in our society to position people and groups of people.
- § They don't provide "happily ever after" endings for complex social problems.

Based on these criteria, student poetry was an appropriate text for critical literacy. The real interest and real social context concern was met because my students were writing about their own individual and group needs, interests, and concerns in their poetry. High school students as a group have been silenced, and marginalized, which was previously linked to alienation. Hearing their voices in poetry was not just appropriate, but necessary. The diverse grouping of the class provided the examination of difference and different perspectives. As students wrote about their own social problems, the class examined the poet's action, or lack of action taken. Students wrote about what love means and life means, which provided the class with a lens to question dominant systems of meaning. Sadly, most of my students were writing because they couldn't find the happily ever after ending, so there was not too much danger of their poems being dominated by these types of endings. Even if they were, the class spent time discussing this desire for the happily ever after.

A major revision of Leland's criteria for text selection must also take place to include texts that do the exact opposite of these criteria because traditionally those are the texts students have been reading, and those texts still dominate the curriculum. Those texts are the ones my students could most benefit from by taking a critical literacy stance. Students must look at those texts to understand the views they have been taking for granted as accurate and most valuable. Many of my students wrote poems that reflected

dominant, status quo, and oppressive views. Those texts, too, had to be read critically. In fact, examining these socially generated negative views of themselves was a major factor in helping my students better understand their agency. I had to keep in mind that some poets only wrote poems for arts sake, and to entertain. Trying to force every student's poem into a critical literacy framework would have been a mistake.

Fluidity of Identity and Critical Literacy

A large part of this study focuses on the struggle to help students who felt powerless chose new images and identities for themselves. A major problem my students faced in their transformation of their identity was that my students had chosen to accept their marginalized self image, which opened the door for other negative self images to creep into students' realities. The hope I had that students could change their self images and overcome their disempowering self images was grounded in identity theory. LeCourt argues that identity is constructed within lived experiences and that identity is fluid⁴⁷. By focusing on identity issues in my classroom, I attempted to provide opportunities for students to lessen the degree of alienation, if they could see that their alienated state was not a permanent one. Students needed to see that they had the ability to choose their identity and that their image of self was within their power to adjust. LeCourt argues that society marginalizes some cultural identities and that we cannot escape how people read our skin, sex, bodies, race, or religion. However, we can escape some other identities like seeing the self as powerless, unlovable, ugly, or worthless. Throughout the many conversations analyzed in the upcoming chapters, I am often trying to convince my students that the powerless student identity is an identity that students can change by refusing to accept that they have little agency. LeCourt argues students can redefine their

⁴⁷ LeCourt 2004.

identities in acts of self agency⁴⁸. This agency was something that so many of my students felt they lacked in their school setting, which may contribute to their feelings of alienation. I struggled all year to help my students understand that their powerless school identity was not a binary identity⁴⁹ (the opposite being the powerful teacher and staff). If there is only a have and a have not, then my students will not see change as a possibility. I need them to see the variations that include a shared power model between teacher and student. The acts of writing about one's identity, as well as acts of dialogue and critical reflection about our identities were major components of the course. It was through these acts that my students came to see the fluidity in their identity and were able to transform their negative self images.

Empowerment and Dialogue as Dimensions of Humanizing Pedagogy

This section focuses on the work of Paulo Freire⁵⁰ which led me to other empowerment and liberation theorists. It was through reading Freire that I first found language to articulate what I wanted for my poetry students, so I will primarily be focusing on his ideas. Paulo Freire's seminal work on freedom and empowerment as an educational end in 1960's Brazil offered me a framework to understand the marginalization of poetry, women, and African American students in 2000's United States of America. His humanizing ideas of empowerment and dialogue are major pieces of the humanizing pedagogy I attempted to practice in my classroom. I needed to draw upon his work because of the types of personal challenges my students revealed in our critical literacy poetry workshop.

⁴⁸ LeCourt 2004.

⁴⁹ See Roberts 2003, for a paraphrase of Freire on Binary identities and the danger of the oppressed taking on the oppressor's reality which impairs one's perception of self.

⁵⁰ Freire 1985.

As I understand Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*⁵¹, he wants all humans to be humanized, which means they and their reality/condition must be transformed from the poor conditions brought on by forces like injustice, oppression, exploitation, violence, and others abuses of power. The quest for freedom then is the quest for human completion.

To paraphrase Freire, the transformation into new humans must start with the oppressed, for whom “to be” means to be under/dependent. This group must be helped to fully recognize their oppression and their need to fight through a process of unveiling, understanding the causes of their condition, and realization that their plight is not a hopeless one. Then, the group must unify and cooperate for liberation, organize, changing their world view, praxis and commitment toward struggling to become a new human. They can begin changing old behaviors by critical thinking, reflection, remaking of struggle, dialogue, understanding of their duality, action toward liberation, ending of silence, and cultural synthesis. At the same time, the oppressed must avoid the pitfalls of this process: fear of freedom, fear of increased repression for comrades, tendency to become an oppressor (in essence acting out the old and only model they knew), fear of replacing the known with autonomy and responsibility. The oppressor must move beyond the duality dilemma, which freezes those who understand their oppressed state but are afraid to do all that is required to change it, overcome a general distrust of their selves and their knowledge, and be able to have faith in and love for human beings.

The two groups in dialogue with each other can forge a new world and restore humanity to both groups. Freire sees the oppressed - oppressor relationship in schools as well, which then necessitates the need for struggle and change in the condition that is

⁵¹ Freire 1989.

education. In banking education, the teacher, as subject, has all of the power, choice, authority, knowledge, and agency, while the student, as object, is merely a passive receptacle waiting to be filled with the next deposit of information. The students are oppressed and marginalized in this system because they must make all the adjustments to the will of a higher power inhibiting their creativity. Instead of this oppressive model of education, Freire argues for a problem posing model, which requires communication between teachers and students, critical thinking, questioning, acts of cognition, and teacher and student learning together mediated by the world around them. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*⁵² he also argues for methodological rigor, right thinking, embracing the new and rejecting discrimination. Freire's critique of banking education gave me a lens to understand the problems in the teaching of poetry that I found when I was reading the poetry literature; a lens to re-see the marginalization of the poetry in public schools and the lack of any real movement to change the state of poetry. It was a lens that helped me see marginalized groups of students as the failure of the oppressive educational system; a lens to see poetry as a vital part of the American students' development and quest for freedom, justice, and a new humanity. The work I was doing in my classroom was helping to show the potential of poetry in the transformation of students and teachers toward more empowered states.

The first step in this quest for humanity process was the unveiling of oppression, which I tried to do during the invention stage of the writing workshop. After my students expressed ways they felt oppressed, subsequent dialogue about their poetry and the issues it raised led to further unveiling of oppressive conditions and their causes. With students who remained quiet, usually female students, I attempted to help work

⁵² Freire 1998.

through their silence. Beyond encouragement of speech, I asked students to write poetry about being silent, why they did not talk, and how silence helped them or worked for them (the advantages and power of being silent). Finally, I tried to help them see ways silence could hold them back and disempower them. When students portrayed stereotypes in their poetry or in their lives, their classmates and I commented on their perceptions and helped them think critically about those stereotypes. We questioned where the stereotype came from, why they still existed, their empowering or disempowering nature, and how they could begin to change these stereotypes to reflect reality and the human the stereotype dehumanized. Students were encouraged to write about these issues in their poetry. Sexism, racism, homophobia were frequently articulated problems in my high school. As the issues came up, students were pushed into critical thinking and writing during the class discussions. As students' rights and freedoms were infringed upon by parents and the school itself, I encouraged them to not only write poems about the experience, but attempted to work toward a solution to their problems.

There was some precedent for my decision to make my poetry classroom a place for liberation and freedom. Fukuyama⁵³ argues that a poem speaks from the heart and soul of people's real life experiences and struggles for freedom, justice, recognition, power, and the ending of oppression. Poetry can disrupt the dominant culture's language patterns, which often leave out culturally diverse people. Poetry workshops are excellent forums for political statements from oppressed groups, which may help students find their political voice. Poems can be used to teach teachers about multiculturalism, so that they can begin to become aware of ways they may be oppressing their culturally diverse

⁵³ Fukuyama 1996.

students. Alexander⁵⁴ argues that poetry can and should be used for the prevention and intervention of adolescent emotional and social problems. The writing workshop was a form of secondary intervention, and my one-on-one consultation with students about their poetry was used for primary intervention. The writing workshop provided a safe house for the expression of feelings that may have otherwise gone unexpressed leading to more serious problems.

My students were given a chance to express themselves in a safe place, away from criticism or censorship. This idea flies in the face of traditional schooling and traditional form based poetry instruction. The problem of what to do with suicide, drugs, rape, and violent poems must be dealt with in school. Do schools and teachers ban the topics, cut down time for poetry in schools, or let them write what they need to write? Do teachers give these poems to adults who make decisions affecting the student's lives? As a teacher providing this vehicle for students to talk about their feelings, I had a window to listen and help those students by showing them that all was not hopeless and that they have the power to change their reality. In this study, I constantly reflected on how I could become a better teacher and develop my own thinking about poetry and my knowledge about students? These questions are close to what Hooks called engaged pedagogy⁵⁵, in which teachers must self actualize and look out for their own well being in order to empower students. Teachers are supposed to grow and be empowered by the process as well. If students take risks then the teacher too must be vulnerable. I learned this lesson early in the class and analyze several letters I wrote to the class, which revealed 'myself' to my students.

⁵⁴ Alexander 1994.

⁵⁵ hooks 1994.

Why My Class Felt Empowering

Though I saw the connection between empowerment, Freire, and my classroom being a natural fit, I was aware of the problems others have had with empowering practices in their classrooms. Despite classroom success stories of using Freire's work in schools⁵⁶, Ellsworth⁵⁷ found contradictions with her attempts to teach a course using critical pedagogy. Students were supposed to discuss sexist, racist, and other offending material using rational, logical, and scientific discourse, which was a discourse they were attempting to dismantle by adding their own voices. In other words, the master's tools can never dismantle the master's house⁵⁸. My study seems to bridge that gap because my students were using their own words, their own language, their own voices and poetic styles to express themselves.

Ellsworth then goes on to argue that empowering efforts with students such as learning the students' culture, bringing the students up to the teacher's level of understanding, sharing, giving, or redistributing power to students fail to challenge any real identifiable social or political position, institution or group. In this study, I argue the immediate need for my high school students to challenge a social or political entity was unnecessary. Instead, I wished to help these young people develop the necessary critical tools to challenge those dominant groups later in life. The more appropriate question seems to be what kind of power structures did my students challenge?

Ellsworth also had problems with notions of emancipatory authority, which implies that teacher knows better than students, and that the teacher is in fact emancipated from the inequalities in their own life. My work also seems to bridge this

⁵⁶ See Zimmet 1987, Burns-McCoy 2000, Shor 1987, Fiore & Elsasser 1987

⁵⁷ Ellsworth 1989.

⁵⁸ Lorde 1984.

gap because I recognized my own struggles for freedom in this country and within the power structures at my school, and understood that I too had to transform along with my students. This study was in many ways about both student and teacher growth and development not about a teacher trying to pass on knowledge to students. The focus was on teacher and student building relationships and learning together, which may provide teachers and researchers with a way of dealing with the power dilemma Ellsworth addresses.

Critical pedagogy⁵⁹ is geared toward the teacher helping students express their knowledge, in their authentic voices, so they can define themselves, and understand their relationship to the world in order to move toward social and political change⁶⁰. Ellsworth argues that there isn't any literature that problematizes the teacher's efforts to help students find their voice. Instead, she argues that too often the teacher is seen as a neutral bystander who is a disinterested mediator. I have already argued that the teacher can not be a voyeur, but must examine their own voice as well. Again, my efforts to help students express their voices in my poetry classroom seems to answer Ellsworth's call for research, and given my theoretical underpinnings of critical literacy and liberation, the call for a problematized study is answered as well.

Dialogue and Empowerment

Dialogue as a pedagogical strategy, where students are safe to speak, have equal opportunity to speak, and each voice is valued is the type of teaching I was striving for.

⁵⁹ Giroux 1997,1989, 1993.

⁶⁰ Shor 1987.

Ellsworth argues that due to numerous social and personal factors, the classroom can never truly be a place where everyone trusts each other enough to say everything that is on their minds. This is a valid criticism, but I tried to do the best I could for all of my students to feel safe and I document the dialogue that manifested. Part of the reason people can not fully trust each other according to Ellsworth is because we can never really know others' cultures and perspectives completely. This study can begin to promote a pedagogy that begins this process because relationship and human interaction were at the center of my humanizing pedagogy.

My approach to dialogue seems different from Ellsworth in that I am advocating that dialogue involves forming closer relationships with students. There have been numerous attempts to bring Freire's dialogue as praxis into modern day classrooms substituting banking educational practices with more problem posing practices. Vella⁶¹ developed a design for using Freire's dialogue in education, which numerous educators followed in case study research. The programs Seven Design Steps are based on who, why, when, where, what, what for, and how questions. Dialogue as pedagogy required overt planning for dialogue opportunities. In the designing and planning of curriculum teachers set up specific learning tasks rooted in dialogue to achieve specific learning objectives. The focus was on inductive activities, disseminating research based information for learners to interact with, substantive tasks to be completed from the research findings, and finally, integration of the information with learners everyday work or school lives and worlds. Some of the other key principles listed in the dialogue based

⁶¹ Vella 2004.

instructional program were: accountability, affirmation, dialogue as a means not an end, feedback not evaluation, immediacy, inclusion, open questions, respect⁶².

My theory contains critical philosophical differences in how dialogue needs to be used with students. Vella found ways to infuse dialogue within a standards based, objectives and indicators driven system. This is a noble undertaking and worked within the system to reform the system. Though I agree dialogue was a pedagogical goal, I did not overtly plan dialogue activities to meet predetermined objectives. I believe that dialogue can and should emerge from the lived experiences of teacher and student within the classroom. In my classroom those experience revolved around student poetry and the issues covered in their poetry about self and society. Once my students wrote something or said something that seemed critical to their growth and development as humans, I attempted to engage them in written or spoken dialogue. Their creations drove dialogue and the curriculum, instead of my preconceived notions or objectives about better poetry. I did not plan or engage in dialogue until students offered up critical material in teachable moments. I engaged them in dialogue to first clarify student meaning and then better understand their perspectives. Then, I could carefully plan out my written comments on their poems to promote further dialogue. Curriculum was a lived experience because their lives became central to the curriculum choices I made. Students' responses to my problem-posing questions lead me into my next set of questions. The dialogue in my classroom was close to what Freire called a dialogue for liberation because quite often it involved helping my students work to confront oppressive forces in their lives.

⁶² Vella 2004.

Another critical difference between my view of dialogue and Vella's is that in both cases dialogue was a means to an end. In Vella's design, dialogue was a means to learning information for the purposes of learners using that information to improve their immediate work or communal settings, which was the taking action piece of Freire's dialogue theory. I used dialogue as a means to build human connections, promote critical reflection, and provide hope. The taking action piece was students becoming empowered by a sense of agency in their lives. A power that allowed them to choose to revise the self and their views about society as well as the power they believed society had over them. I used dialogue to help point out contradictions in their realities, social realities, and sometimes what I view as reality. This use of dialogue was driven by a love for my students, which Freire argues is an essential piece of any dialogue.

My view of what dialogue can be used for is also in line with Parker. Parker argued that dialogue needs to have a set of basic rules. The teacher or listener needs to be present to another person's problems in a quiet, receptive way that encourages the soul to come forth, a way that does not presume to know what is right for the other but allows the others' soul to find its own answers at its own level and pace⁶³. Parker's humanizing views are rooted in Quaker community committees who ask questions that do not promote the questioner's agenda, but help the focus person discover wisdom within.

I wanted my students to find the wisdom within each of them and act on that wisdom to revise images of self and society, which I thought could be empowering for them. The key was that the questions asked to promote the dialogue were meant to help the person with the immediate problem better their human condition. Parker's theory needs Freire's theory to make it more complete. The listener or teacher in my case is also

⁶³ Parker 1998.

made more human by engaging in the dialogue. The discourse between my students and I helped me become a more reflective and better teacher. The dialogue we engaged in not only helped students select more empowered identities, but allowed me to name and define my identity as a teacher.

Roberts⁶⁴ also argued that dialogue is a way to become more fully human, because developing or humanness cannot be done in isolation. It is through dialogue, he argues that humans recreate themselves, which is what many of my students and I were able to do. Roberts then goes on to paraphrase Freire's argument that dialogue is the key to knowledge because these encounters between men mediated by the world help us name the world. Dialogue in my class was humanizing and a necessary part of the teaching process, which is why my data analysis focuses heavily on dialogue.

Love as a Dimension of Humanizing Pedagogy

Inherent in my dialogue argument is a profound need for teachers to form loving relationships with students so that dialogue is able to take place. Freire asks "How can I be an educator if I do not develop in myself a caring and loving attitude toward the student, which is indispensable on the part of one who is committed to teaching and to the education process itself?"⁶⁵ Freire later begins to define this caring and loving attitude as respecting students' identity, dignity, autonomy, and humanity. Critics like Darder⁶⁶ and others have also advocated for teaching to be an act of love, but I am drawn to Hook's definition of love in teaching. She argues love is the combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust⁶⁷. This loving attitude allows

⁶⁴ Roberts 2003.

⁶⁵ Freire 1988 page 83.

⁶⁶ Darder 2003.

⁶⁷ hooks 2000.

the teacher to learn from students, respond better to individualized problems, affirm their emotional well being, and form life long bonds as a result of this recognition of who students are by the teacher⁶⁸. The issue of knowing our students is unquestionably educationally sound, but how do you come to know them in non superficial way? I was interested in coming to know their voice, identities, and more than stereotypical knowledge and tolerance of and for their race, class, gender, culture, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientations. It is not an easy thing to break down the walls and barriers that our educational system has put up between teacher and student to protect both parties. But until those sterile walls are broken, no loving relationship can be formed over that power differentiating moat. The key to my loving students ideology is not just loving, but expressing that love for students. A major way I expressed that love was putting students' human issues first and foremost in my classroom.

My argument for love as an integral aspect of my classroom acknowledges, yet moves beyond, teaching as a moral activity. Hansen⁶⁹ argues that teaching is moral because it presupposes notions of better and worse, of good and bad. Teacher virtues include patience, attentiveness, and respect, open-mindedness, to intentionally influence humans for the good or a desirable change in students. Teachers' conduct, character, perception, judgment, and understanding are important because much of what makes teaching a moral endeavor is unintentional and unwilled because morals are passed on in teachers style, manners, tact (which Hansen defines as the ability to act thoughtfully and sensitively to individual students)⁷⁰. My argument is that sometimes the thoughtful and sensitive thing to do for a student is to love them and express that love for them

⁶⁸ hooks 2000

⁶⁹ Hansen 2001

⁷⁰ Hansen 2001

pedagogically. For example, because my students had so much trouble loving themselves and finding love and validation from others, I made it my goal to provide love and validation for them in my classroom.

The love I argue must be present in the classroom encompasses the morality that Hansen argues is in teaching. The teacher would have to be concerned with all of the moral aspects Hansen mentions in order to become a person with whom students want to enter into a relationship geared toward critical growth and learning. Without the virtues Hansen addresses, teachers would not be able to respect students enough to come to love them. Hansen argues for a general moral stance on the part of the teacher and that each teacher brings their moral vision of the world with them into the classroom. If that is the case, then for me, love was part of my moral vision that I had to bring to my classroom, along with critical literacy, empowering, and humanizing pedagogies.

Hansen argues teachers must try to influence students for the good. What I am calling the good will naturally differ from other teachers, but I argue must also differ from student to student. My view of the good is grounded in the pedagogy of love that Freire and Darder⁷¹ argue for. It is a love that is grounded in the political and the social good for all humans especially those oppressed in society. It is a love grounded in social justice and the belief that the society, not just schools, is in need of radical revision to humanize our learners.

The love I am advocating and attempted to express to my students encompasses what Nell Noddings calls caring education, because I am talking about loving students for a reason, which is to further their humanity, and to confront disempowering issues. Love is a tool and the expression of love is the way that tool is used to benefit students in the

⁷¹ Darder, 2002

classroom. Hooks⁷² argues that love is a transformative force and a healing force. It requires an individual to extend the self to nurture your own or someone else's growth. For Hooks, love is about service. To perform this service, we must first care, then shed our own baggage in order to have the capacity to recognize the needs of other and fulfill them. I am arguing that to love a student requires a teacher to take actions in the classroom to meet student needs after the teacher has clearly heard a student articulate a need. Sometimes the baggage a teacher may have to remove will be a piece of the curriculum. To love a child, teachers must uphold the child's rights⁷³, but I would also argue that beyond legal rights, the child's human rights must also be upheld. Given this fact, love is an essential dimension of humanizing pedagogy and must be present in all of the other dimensions. There must be love present in dialogue to make it loving dialogue aimed at helping students reflect and critically examine self. A loving teacher needs to support students engaging in critical literacy, and developing their sense of agency.

Despite the need for love in teaching, Hooks⁷⁴ points out those teachers who love their students and who are loved by them remain suspect in the academy. The suspicion is based on fear of romantic love and the belief that education is neutral and non-biased. Hooks then offers a remedy, which is that the love she offers to students is okay because it is available to all students. In this study, I was trying to express love to all students, by allowing love to guide the actions I took in class or during discussion, and the comments I made on student poetry. Parker⁷⁵ argues the connections to students are not held in methods but in the heart where intellect, emotion and spirit converge in the human self. I

⁷² Hooks 2000

⁷³ Hooks 2000

⁷⁴ Hooks 1994

⁷⁵ Parker 1998

wanted to offer my human self to my students because I wanted to build connections, decrease alienation, and establish the trust with students to allow them to want to go on a journey of self exploration with me through their poetry.

Love as humanizing pedagogy also encompasses the love of self. Self love is necessary for all humans. Hooks⁷⁶ and Parker⁷⁷ argue that self love is a healthy form of narcissism because it involves the acceptance of self and the value of self worth. Teacher and student must be able to love themselves. Teachers need to love themselves because they need to believe in who they are in the classroom and what they have to offer students in order to be successful. Teachers may also need to model self love to alienated students like mine, who did not love themselves. My students needed to love themselves because so many forces and voices in society have delivered a message not to love themselves. Self love is about the accepting and validating of self⁷⁸, which Hooks argues is a much needed validation because the self as unlovable is a socialized vision of self. One of the major ways students can come to love themselves, Hooks argues, is through affirmation by others because humans are not isolated creatures. The “other” in my classroom was me because I saw helping students love themselves as an act of loving service to be performed in my classroom. Hooks⁷⁹ also argues that reflection is a tool to ignore the inner and outside voices that reject and devalue individuals. I hoped that asking critical questions as I commented on student poetry could provide them with opportunities at this type of reflection. I also engaged them in dialogue about loving themselves, which was another powerful tool for a healing and loving self process. For

⁷⁶ Hooks 2000

⁷⁷ Parker 1998

⁷⁸ Hooks 2000

⁷⁹ Hooks 2000

my classroom, I had to come to know and love my students, which in turn gave me a loving obligation to adjust my pedagogy and curriculum to address the needs of my students who did not appear to love themselves.

A Humanizing Purpose for Poetry: Merging Freire and Lorde

Freire argues that human existence cannot be silent or nourished by false words. Only true words can transform the world so people must name their world in order to change it. Given his argument, the teacher trying to move poetry students toward freedom and a new humanity must provide them with space to express their own clear and distinct written voice. Numerous definitions and arguments about what voice is and why it is important in poetry exist⁸⁰. A student's written voice is represented in the words, phrases, ideas, styles, techniques, emotions, and choices that a student makes in a piece of writing. A student's written voice is a separate entity from that student. In other words, once that piece of writing comes into existence, it is a living thing that operates independently of that student, but it belongs to that student. It has its own characteristics, tone, and way of telling that may be different from the actual student. Written voice should not be confused with a student's subconscious, which is their inner personal voice. All writers have a written voice, but not all writers are in control of their voice, and are able to manipulate in a clear and distinct fashion. Clarity not only means that their readers must understand their text, but also that the students themselves must understand their text and what it is doing. The distinctness of written voice simply means that the student is pursuing original thoughts in their texts. The ideas, images, emotions, and thoughts should all come from within the student, which will make them distinct because they are distinct individuals. In problem posing poetry workshops, students will be asked

⁸⁰ See Sheets 1994 for studies on voice.

to name themselves, their art form, their poetry, their worlds, then reflect, act, and rename. This process of helping students find their clear distinct voice maps onto Freire's struggle for a new humanity, which he calls freedom and permanent liberation.

Many poets still hold to the ancient beliefs of Plato where a poet could only write propaganda poetry or poetry praising the state, and never write using emotions, which can't be controlled and lead to chaos. Forcing students into this type of political voice in the invention stage is not what is meant by coming to a political voice. The art for arts sake philosophy, telling students to write poetry simply for the beauty and joy of writing poetry, is like telling students to do their homework simply because they are in school. The major problem that poetry still faces is the question, "What is the point of teaching poetry in high schools?" Classic explanations within the debate about the end of poetry have not helped me see a path to avoid marginalization of our students and move them toward Freire's vision of liberation, empowerment and critical literacy, which I believe can help my students.

Too many students, especially African Americans, women, and all other minorities, continue to be marginalized and dehumanized in and by our educational system and continue to wait for teachers to show them another way. Poetry can be an effective vehicle to help empower these students to make changes to their realities. Combining Freire and the thinking of Audre Lorde makes showing students this new way possible.

Lorde espouses the idea of poetry as survival and necessity for humans in her essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury"⁸¹. For Lorde, poetry is the place we go to survive oppression. Though Lorde takes up the case of women of all colors and sexual

⁸¹ Lorde 1984.

orientations, and creates tension for anyone who is "the other" in this essay, one cannot allow that to stop them from seeing how her theories apply to all poets and subsequently to students.

Similar to Freire's "name your world to change it" philosophy, Lorde argues that poetry is a means of giving "name to those ideas which are- until the poem- nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt." (23)⁸² Lorde argues that for women these ideas are usually repressed, which means they are hidden, deep, dark and ancient. Lorde argues that women need to fuse together the reliance on ideas for freedom (from the white fathers) with the reliance on feelings and "those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes" (from the ancient and non-European) in order to survive. Women come closest to this fusion in their poetry. Thus poetry is not a luxury, but is necessary for survival.

Lorde's essay, though directed at women, is not exclusive. When I read this essay it changed my entire way of thinking about poetry. Any poet or student who has faced any type of oppression, taken too much stock in rational thought and ideas, paid too little attention to their true feelings, or who has thoughts that they keep hidden away deep inside themselves, has something to gain from Lorde's argument. The theory is salvation and personal therapy for the individual. The more oppression the individual or student experiences, the more of a vital necessity the practice of poetry becomes to that person. It was continuing to write during those traumatic teachings I experienced growing up that helped me survive. It is this type of writing that can flourish in a humanizing writing workshop.

⁸² Lorde 1984.

The poet for Lorde, (and for me the American high school student also) can ill afford to be silent. Again the more oppressions one faces, like being poor, black, female, and lesbian in a racist patriarchal society, the more dangerous the silence becomes. The danger is in two realms; the personal and the social. We have already been talking indirectly about the dangers of silence in the personal realm. When the individual poet is silent, it results in the further repression of feelings and emotion. That poet must transform their silence into words. That poet must express their feelings and emotions in order to survive. The ending of silence with words is therapeutic for the individual. The writing helps them come to grips with what is crippling them. Lorde argues that each poet is important and must refuse to be silent. If you acknowledge yourself and your reality, it helps you deal with that reality. It is this stance I took with my students in the invention stage to help them end their silences. I analyze my efforts in chapter three.

Lorde argues that the poet must end silence in order for personal survival and put an end to their interior oppressions and repression for a reason. The poet has an obligation to speak her/his true feelings and emotions in order to serve as an example to others in repression, who may have been afraid to speak. The poet must assume that she/he is not alone in the world, and that there are others like them who are also suffering. This poet must write their true emotions giving voice not only to the self, but to those without a voice. Critical literacy as a stance will help ensure that the community can hear and respond to the individual voices. I encouraged my students to write back to their peers when a common nerve was struck to help end isolation. The writing back happened very little, but group dialogue became their vehicle for solidarity in the class.

The pressure is on the individual to train their feelings and transpose them into language, which is survival for the poet, but once the language is created it is to be shared by anyone else who needs it, which leads to survival of the group. What is fundamental to this argument is Lorde's belief that the poet is not isolated, but a member of some group or community. The poet must help themselves first and in the process help the group by sharing the language the poet found for self preservation. The movement is toward a social change and a change of the current oppressive conditions and culture toward Freire's new humanity. Critical literacy's focus on the individual and their relationship to society was vital in helping my students survive.

Lorde's arguments seem to be applicable to my students. Despite what many might like to believe, high school students are not free from oppression. They are by systematic design restricted from large things like free expression and choices, to mundane things like clothing and the right to go to the bathroom. High school students are struggling with all types of personal and social issues. As a group of people, they have an uphill battle to climb toward a successful future. Given their plight, and the power of poetry to help end silence, it seems evident that students need to express themselves. They must be afforded the opportunity to communicate and heal themselves. They must share their experience with others to end their isolation, and help other students find a way to articulate their own frustrations. We can not give them freedom or liberation, but we can provide them with a tool to lead their own liberation movement.

Humanizing the Writing Workshop

This final section, discusses the actual changes I made to the traditional writing workshop format to address the numerous issues raised earlier in this chapter. First, I had

to find ways to decrease the amount of power given to teachers in schools and as the head of the writing workshop. I was interested in student empowerment and helping students express their agency. Traditionally and in true patriarchal fashion, the role of the teacher in the workshop was to tell students what to write in the invention stage and grade their efforts. To avoid that disempowering role, which has students writing for the teacher not themselves, I showed my students a different type of teacher from day one. I told the students that there are no traditional grades in the course. The best writer and the worst writer were both getting A's in the class. I did not put a single grade on anything that they wrote. Instead, they received an A on whatever they turned in as long as it was on time. I needed students to understand that the focus of the class was not on pleasing a teacher, but instead on improving their writing, and coming to critically understand the self and their relationships to society.

I told them that they were free to write about whatever they felt they needed to write about in this class. The class was their place to express their own ideas, thoughts, feelings, and voice. By voice I mean both the finding of the individual voice⁸³, and due to critical literacy, the notion of coming to voice⁸⁴, which is in line with Freire's finding of political voice⁸⁵. This approach was a slight variation from the invention approaches that provide creative writing students with prompts, assigned topics, activities, or assigned types of poems to help students begin the creative process. I was working on the assumption that creativity was not a skill to be taught; rather something that already exists inside of each of us because we are unique individuals, which also implies that originality cannot be taught either. I was assuming that my students were complicated

⁸³ Lensmire 1994, and Calkin 1986

⁸⁴ Hooks 1989.

⁸⁵ Freire 1985.

people from diverse backgrounds, who did in fact have topics to write about. If a student did in fact say they had writer's block, my role was to ask them about their life and allowed them to talk until we came across something they wanted to write about or express.

Teaching poetic forms as a means for poetry instruction is not art. It simply assumes that poetry is a set of skills that can be poured into the students. I always believed art is supposed to come from inside the mind of the individual. When one is forced to use an art form (poetry), especially through rigorous practice of techniques, or forms, they are not exactly producing art. To be an artist, the use of that art form must be done skillfully, consistently, matching form to content for internal drives or needs.

Some poets disagree with my view, and endorse students imitating and copying great poets as a means of invention. These teachers want to empower students by helping them with the difficult process of finding their voice, but they cripple the students with models reinforcing the old disempowering system. Mistakenly, Kuhlman⁸⁶ argues that voice is not singular, but it is "a composite of the others' voices and ones' own manipulation, interpretation, and reuse of those words." In class, students would be given multicultural poems to read as a shared commodity. Kuhlman then found that the students' voice appropriated the voices of the famous poets the teachers selected. The similarities between student poems and professional poems the teacher found was not the epiphany they make it out to be. Most people understand that if you give a student a model, they will follow it. Naively, the teachers in the study didn't see any difference between giving the students a form model (like a haiku) and giving them a Langston Hughes poem. Both are models that the teacher in authority gave to the students as

⁸⁶ See Kuhlman 1999 page 17.

examples of good poetry, but the Langston Hughes poem, due to his popularity and talent is too strong of a model for young writers. What did they expect from a group of students in school, where right answers and giving teachers what they ask for reign supreme? Great poets (canonized authors) and great poems (those most frequently anthologized) have the potential to enslave young writers, robbing them of their own humanity, especially when teachers present them as models to emulate. Appropriation is only powerful when you have a solid base that you venture out from, take from others, and use in your own way. When you have no sound base, which consists of being comfortable with your personal style, voice, and level of confidence about writing like many young students, appropriation is only imitation, which is disempowering because the individual uses the other in place of the self. I encouraged every student to reinvent the wheel when it comes to their own voice, understanding their struggle will result in their own wheel, rolling like no other towards a new humanity.

The drafting stage of the writing workshop is where the students actually write their poems within the classroom community. Most times they wrote in class, though many students finished working on poems at home, or wrote something outside of class. My role during this phase was to try to stay out of the student's way. I saw my role as keeping the class relatively quiet so the students could concentrate on what they were working on. A lot of teachers circulate around the room during this phase and make comments as students create. Circulating and commenting are wonderful methods for an essay writing workshop where it is highly probable that students will run into confusion and need personal attention. However in a humanizing poetry workshop, the artists need time to work alone, and work through their own confusions to create their art. How can

students express themselves in their own voices if they hear my voice in their ears as they write? My goal was to respect their human capacity to create and trust that their lives were interesting enough and valid enough to produce text.

The revision stage was where my role as a humanizing teacher was most prominent. My comments on the students' poetry had the potential to be very helpful or very damaging to the poems and the students themselves. My role during the teacher edit phase of the writing workshop was the most challenging, exciting, and most delicate. First, I did not see my primary role as an editor. I couldn't help but circle spelling and grammatical errors (which may have been intentional) because they often interfere with meaning in student writing. I did not see my primary goal as the judge of whether or not their poem was good or not. I did not want to be in the position of saying I like a poem or I don't like a poem. My personal opinion of their poem really had no place in the classroom. I didn't want the students writing to please me, they should be writing to please themselves and their audience. I was not the gatekeeper of good poetry. That was not a humanizing role for me as a teacher and it dehumanizes my students by placing them in the position of trying to please a superior being.

My initial role was to encourage students to want to write more poetry about the issues and subjects that are important to them. I did not have a set speech or any stock comments. Like Lensmire and Graves⁸⁷, I was essentially following the child, which means letting their voice and text lead. My role was to read each poem carefully, then base my feedback where the poem sent me. My job was to respond to the dialogue the student started by writing the poem. I asked questions of the student to clear up any confusion I had as I tried to understand the words on the page. Once I cleared up

⁸⁷ Lensmire 1994, and Graves 1983.

confusion, I commented on poetic elements like diction, style, form, and other language issues, which all poetry teachers do. I also tried to find the best part of the poem. By best I mean the strongest lines, strongest image, most interesting or original thought insight, perspective, or idea. Sometimes it was the title, a word, a line, a stanza, or the entire poem. I talked to the student about why that part was wonderful and I encouraged them to write more like that, or revise the poem around that part. I tried to point out to the students things that make their writing different from the other writers in the class and the numerous poets I have read, which helped them see what they were doing was special.

I gave students multiple readings or interpretations of their work that I happen to notice, and I asked them if they intended to have readers understand in the ways I mentioned. If they said yes, my role was to help them see how to get their meaning across more clearly and powerfully. If they said no, we discussed what they were trying to do in the poem and what their intentions were. This protocol was close to Murray's⁸⁸ comment on the draft, teacher reading of draft, teacher response, student response to the teacher's comments, the teacher responds to student, and then the student writes again. My role was to help them match their intent to the words on the page through this type of dialogue.

What was valued in this phase of the workshop was each student's dialogue surrounding the poem. The peers of the poet served as the community that the poem interacted with and was situated within. My role was to facilitate discussion when and if the discussion seems to be breaking down, or students were having trouble accessing the poem. My role was to help students see how the poem and their reactions to the poem

⁸⁸ Murray 1985.

are influenced by society. I helped students see the poems and themselves with critical insight and begin to take a critical look at society. In many ways my role was similar to Price and Osborne⁸⁹ who explore the challenges of developing a humanizing pedagogy with their pre-service teacher candidates. Humanizing pedagogy was seen as a process, through which teacher and student are able to become more human by understanding their selves, and their worlds through critical reflection and from particular historical and cultural stances. They promoted discourse among their students, so that the students could articulate and question their voices and views about teaching in order to further their understanding of teaching. This type of pedagogy was trying to help these pre-service teachers become better prepared to engage students from diverse backgrounds in light of the numerous social inequalities they face. The researcher/ teachers roles were to develop this critical community without silencing individual voices including their own. One main approach they used as to value the students' own life stories and ways of knowing, as well as the critical examination of those stories and understandings. Price and Osborne also shared their own understandings and histories as the group worked through issues of power and pushed beyond the singular development of self in critical pedagogy to the development of the multiple facets of humanity. Hopefully, by using humanizing pedagogy with critical literacy, I was able to strengthen community bonds in the workshop, foster more mutual respect like Lensmire wanted for peers in the workshop, and help alleviate some of the negative constraints communities place on the writer⁹⁰.

⁸⁹ Price and Osborne 2000.

⁹⁰ See Harris 1989 and Goodman 1992 for discussions of communal restraints on writers.

The publication or final draft phase of the workshop took on new meaning in the critical literacy classroom. The polished draft was not meant to remain in the students' folders and become finish graded work for the student to move away from. The texts were not isolated and kept from society. The work was ready to be received by the school, the home, the community, and through submissions to various contest and magazines society at large. I encouraged students to submit their work to the school's literary magazine. I encouraged students to let their friends, parents, teachers, and anyone else their work might speak to read their work and engage in further dialogue and discussion.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a discussion of the important dimensions of a humanizing pedagogy in a poetry writing workshop: critical literacy, empowerment, love and dialogue. There were numerous roles for teacher and student in terms of engaging in the processes of critical literacy, empowerment, love, dialogue, and a humanizing writing workshop, which will be examined further in ensuing chapters. My understandings of humanizing pedagogy certainly are philosophically aligned with the therapist approach to teaching in Fenstermacher's seminal work Approaches to Teaching⁹¹ because humanizing pedagogy is also interested in helping students accept self and reach self-actualization. In addition, humanizing pedagogy also embraces the liberationist approach to teaching because part of the therapy a student might need is the freeing of their mind and their moral human development. Though Fenstermacher would argue my next addition is impossible, I would still say that a humanizing pedagogue can also use an executive approach when a particular student demonstrated a need for certain skills. No, a

⁹¹ Fenstermacher 1992.

humanizing pedagogy does not philosophically match the executive approach, but humanizing pedagogy is not about a teacher entrenching oneself in an exclusive approach and not being flexible to student's individual human needs. Humanizing pedagogy is willing to try multiple approaches to reach a student, but the end is always about human growth and development. Thus, it would be quite difficult for a fundamentalist to be a humanizing pedagogue, but a teachers following Dewey could.

Having a clearer idea of the expectations of teacher and student as well as the goals I had for the class, places readers in a position to take their first steps into my classroom. In the ensuing chapters, I reveal how using critical literacy to revise the poetry writing workshop helped with student alienation. I also explore how loving and critical dialogue helped address my students' lack of agency and disempowering thoughts, beliefs, images, about themselves and their worlds.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Introduction

Given my emphasis on the process by which teaching, learning, personal growth, and changes in pedagogy occurred over time in my classroom, a qualitative research methodology was logical because it involves rich description and close examination of people, classrooms, and interactions between teacher and students. I also believed that my humanizing pedagogy needed a humanizing form, which the narrative elements of qualitative research provided. However, action research seemed to be a natural methodological approach in my study because I was trying to understand the dilemmas involved with transforming my teaching and classroom. After defining action research, this chapter responds to criticism of action research, and then explains how I dealt with validity issues in my study. Next, this chapter discusses my two research questions: How do students and teacher come to understand issues of self in a poetry writing workshop taught in humanizing ways? What are some of the critical features of humanizing pedagogy in a poetry writing workshop? The chapter then moves to how I gained access to my research sight, an explanation of the school, and the participants. Finally, the chapter concludes with my data collection and data analysis processes.

Defining Action Research

I was naturally drawn to action research, because integral to the work of teaching is the study my own practice in order to improve my own teaching as well as the ability of my students to learn in my classroom. Whispers of teachers doing research on and in

their own classrooms were heard in the 1930's. Noffke⁹² links the term action research back to Collier's 1930 democratic agricultural planning work and social psychologist Kurt Lewin's initiation of a teacher change cycle. Action research is a term first attributed to Lewin's work which was trying "...to find ways to involve social actors (school teachers and others) with researchers through group decision making and elaborate problem-solving procedures as ways of implementing social and cultural changes."⁹³ The purpose was to make changes in teachers' professional growth and or social justice in education. Cochran-Smith and Lytle⁹⁴ argue for action research as social inquiry, which is using action research for societal improvements. Cochran-Smith⁹⁵ suggests that action research may be the vehicle for both teachers and students to raise questions about the status quo. They also argue that helping teachers develop an inquiry stance will make teachers better critical thinkers, which will help teachers make their students better critical thinkers. The acts of questioning the roles of teachers and students in the learning process, questioning the meaning and purpose of school, and the equity in schools, have dominated action research agendas.

Action research, then, must have three components: systematic inquiry (like all teacher research), a desired change (promoting some form of social justice), and planned teacher actions for their teaching to move toward that change. The form of action research most in keeping with the roots of the action research would be action geared toward democracy, emancipation, equity, and social justice. My research connects to action research geared toward social change for a number of reasons: I was attempting to

⁹² Noffke 1995.

⁹³ Hollingsworth and Sockett 1994.

⁹⁴ Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1990.

⁹⁵ Cochran-smith 1993.

help alienated students with poor self-images realize the power within themselves, I wanted my students to see themselves as having more power and control over multiple aspects of their lives, I wanted my students to have the courage to take action in their lives when they desired a change, and I was transforming myself and my pedagogy based on the human interactions and needs of my students.

Answering Action Research Critics

Over the past seventy years, action research has continued to grow in schools.⁹⁶

The early 1990's saw a boom in teachers doing research. In every discipline, teachers were investigating issues that concerned them. The work of Atwell,⁹⁷ in the 80's, gained critical acclaim in the 90's. Collections of teachers doing research were being published and read by teachers and teacher organizations like the National Council of Teachers of

English. Books like Inside/Outside, and journals like Classroom Action Research Studies, are excellent examples of action research. Despite the growth, a major criticism of action research still persists. Berlin⁹⁸ asks how you are supposed to change society in your classroom teaching and where is the research that accomplishes all of these lofty social goals? On the one hand, Noffke⁹⁹ argues that teachers don't have the power or political connections to make these social changes. On the other hand, too many teacher written research studies are simply benign, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle argue.

My action research is geared at social justice and human growth and development. I believe that my effort to help individual students move from alienated to connected, from the marginalized to leaders, and from the silenced to the voices of our

⁹⁶ To trace the growth of action research see, Ziechner 1994, Stenhouse 1983, Brophy and Good 1986, Kemmis 1981, Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999.

⁹⁷ Awell 1987.

⁹⁸ Berlin 1990.

⁹⁹ Noffke 1995.

future answers the criticism about a lack of social change in action research because empowering the students who will run society is a way to change society. At the beginning of the year, my students felt alienated and were choosing not to participate in their school, political, and or social realities because they saw no possibility of changing those realities. My systematic human interaction with and recording of their realities helped to validate my students and myself as a teacher. My pedagogical approach aimed at changing teacher and student into to more empowered human beings, who were a little more confident in their ability to love self and become change agents in our worlds. My research could have a social impact because of the lives that I and my students will now lead. The social impact can also be viewed as the potential humanizing changes become possibilities in education once teachers read then experience humanizing pedagogy in their own classrooms, and as theorists and researchers better understand the interplay between critical literacy, love, dialogue, empowerment, poetry, and pedagogy.

Another issue that I and all researchers need to address is that of validity. For a teacher researcher the challenge seems more substantial. First, teachers not university professionals, are conducting the research. Second, teachers are researching their own practice as opposed to neutrally observing other teachers. Validity in education “refers to the adequacy and appropriateness of the interpretations made from assessments, with regard to a particular use”¹⁰⁰. My burden was to establish that my interpretations of the data from my classroom were appropriate given concerns over bias from being too close to the data. The fact that I was close to my data meant I was close to my students, which allowed me to have a particular insight that the outsider researcher might not develop.

The other way I addressed the validity of my study was by checking my interpretations of

¹⁰⁰ Linn and Gronlund 1995 page 63.

my students with my students, which helped assure me that my interpretations about them were accurate and gave me confidence to adjust the curriculum and my comments on their poems accordingly.

Anderson and Herr ¹⁰¹offer five validity tests for how quality teacher research can be framed. Part of their search for criteria is a response to the occasions when both insider and outsider research the same site. They ask the question how the teacher's research is going to be seen as equal and not dismissed without validity standards. One way teachers can be successful is outcome validity, which is concerned with well planned, thoughtful research that addresses the original problem and moves toward a solution of the problem. In my case, I could not solve my students' problems related to self image. They had the agency and power to make their own changes, and my goal was to provide challenges through my teaching to help them choose more positive self images. The notion of solving a problem also fails to do justice to the process of change that takes place during learning and personal growth. If action research is about trying to make changes and the change is not brought about, despite all efforts, isn't that research outcome equally valuable if the process of change has been engaged in by students? What must be judged as success is not problem solving, but the level of systematic inquiry into the problem, and the degree to which I questioned, sought answers, made adjustments, and re-conceptualized. In essence how I re-thought, re-taught, and documented my re-research, is what makes teacher research high quality. I did what Zeichner implies that good teacher researchers must do, which is to "genuinely problematize their practice and interrogate it in a deep way."¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Anderson and Herr 1999.

¹⁰² Zeichner 1994.

Anderson and Herr's next validity test is process validity, which is primarily concerned with evidence to support assertions. There is no question that this tenant of qualitative research must be upheld in teacher research to respond to criticisms that teachers so close to their own classroom will form biased or inaccurate assertions about that classroom. I used triangulation methods as one strategy to quiet the obvious and unavoidable researcher bias issues in teacher research on their own practice. Stake¹⁰³ suggests several ways to validate or ensure a logical interpretation of the data. Other researchers can examine the same data in order to check the researcher's claims. I used my doctoral committee during analysis, my students during the class, and ultimately my readers by including a tremendous contribution of the student voices. I used what Erickson calls basic validity, which is concerned with local meanings. This is trying to determine the "immediate meanings of actions from the actor's point of view"¹⁰⁴. I concentrated on getting things 'right' by accurately portraying the students' views of themselves through thick description and clear examples from the class.

Member checking in the form of students examining my preliminary findings and assumptions for accuracy of the classroom climate, problems, and issues is another of Stake's suggestions. Hammersley and Atkison¹⁰⁵ call this respondent validation. I cannot stress enough the importance of talking to my students about my assumptions, beliefs, and understandings of their perspectives and poetry. Though I did not actually have students read this document, I did share my assumptions about them as frequently as I could during classroom dialogues. Checking my assumptions with my students was humanizing because my students were valued and their lives were validated by this

¹⁰³ Stake 1987.

¹⁰⁴ Erickson 1986.

¹⁰⁵ Hammersley and Atkison 1995.

process. They were not subjects, but people, and I owed them the simple respect of bouncing my ideas off of them just as they bounced ideas off of me. I did was trying to improve my teaching more so than my research, so I did not engage in formal member checking.

Their third validity is democratic validity, which asks that the many stake holders in the problem be involved in the process of addressing the problem. Issues of social justice and equity for me, fall under this criterion. Violation of democratic, social, equity, ethical, gender, racial, cultural, and sexual issues must be seen as valid pursuits for action research. However, I would add that democratic validity may not be the best term to use. I endorse the term humanizing validity because research on students by teachers needs to do more than just ask students to have a stake. Democracy alone, especially in America, is not enough to ensure the human rights of all students. The validity test should ensure that all students are stake holders, active participants, and treated with respect, equality, validated as humans, and when any human need arises in the participants, the research and researcher attempted to address that need.

Their fourth criterion that Anderson and Herr identify is catalytic validity, which is concerned with the transformative power of the research. The degree the teacher is open to rethinking and re-framing teacher roles, knowledge, practice, etc. They argue for a clear change in teacher understanding. My research met this concern because part of what was being researched was my own growth as teacher, thinker, researcher, poet, theorist, and human. During the study, my understandings of pedagogy, curriculum, and my students also transformed. The most important transformation in my study was the

transformations made by my students, which may need to become a measure of validity in action research.

Their last validity is the dialogic, which asks for peer review as research journals require. They want a peer group to make sure everything fits institutionally and research wise. Other than reassurance, what real validity can these peers offer unless those peers understand exactly what I was trying to do in my classroom and research? Strauss and Corbin¹⁰⁶ suggest allowing people with similar theoretical backgrounds to analyze data. If the researcher's interpretations match, then the researcher can have more confidence in their findings. Peer review and joint analysis were hard for me to come by when one of my supervisors thought Freire was an extremist. Some of my school administrators feared I was trying to brainwash my students with my political agenda. Peer review was also hard to come by given my colleagues' workloads and lives. Yes, they were interested and I shared vignettes when asked, but they did not have time to provide the critique I needed. Krathwohl¹⁰⁷ suggests that action researchers: work in groups to enhance critical reflection, consider multiple solutions to problems, test assumptions, consider potential drawbacks of actions taken, and conduct accurate data collection through note taking, journals or logs. However, I had finished all of my course work by the time I started this study, so I did not have classmates on hand to offer their critique and there were not other teachers in my school engaging in action research at the time. My research was a lonely endeavor. I did not have this kind of community suggested for validity, so I created my own community. I shared chapters with my parents who both hold doctorates, but I wasn't after critique (though they gave it anyway); I just wanted to

¹⁰⁶ Strauss & Corbin 1998.

¹⁰⁷ Krathwohl 1998.

share my passion with them. My research would have been no more or less valid if more or less people had been consulted because the true test comes within the classroom context and with my students and readers.

Research Questions

When I first proposed this study, I had three main questions and subsidiary questions for each, which were changed based on my developing understandings of my students, my self, and my pedagogy. Below are the original questions followed by and explanation of how they developed and an explanation of the new questions.

1. **What are some of the critical features of critical literacy pedagogy in a writing workshop?** What does a critical literacy writing workshop look like? What roles does the teacher play in the writing process? What roles do the students play in the writing process? What type of interactions take place between teacher and student in a critical literacy writing workshop?
2. **How do students and teacher come to understand issues self, expression of voice, and the individuals' relationship with society through text produced in a critical literacy writing workshop?** In what ways does one's critical consciousness develop about the self in the writing workshop? In what ways do students' voices manifest themselves in a critical literacy writing workshop? In what ways can poetic text shape understanding of self and society in the writing workshop?
3. **How can student poetry be a vehicle for critical literacy? What topics do students choose to write about?** How do those topics relate to and influenced by issues in society? In what ways do students' choices of style, voice,

diction, form, and other poetic elements reveal things about that students' understanding of self and their relationship to society? How do students feelings about their poems, the subjects they choose, and the critical reception of their poems by teacher and peers promote or hinder their understandings of self and their relationship to society? How do the teacher's comments on student poetry effect issues of self and their relationship to society?

These questions were an appropriate starting point based on my understandings prior to entering my classroom and coming to know my students. The biggest shift in my research focus was moving from critical literacy as an umbrella to humanizing pedagogy as my framework. In the course of the study and reflecting on theory, I realized that critical literacy was just one piece of the humanizing pedagogy that I was attempting to make a lived experience in my classroom. As a result, question two above was changed to my question one below, which focuses on humanizing pedagogy not critical literacy (a component of humanizing pedagogy). The "issues of self" piece of the old question became more important than issues of voice, and individual's relationships with society as the class progressed and my students began to reveal their particular problems with self image, self love, self esteem, and agency. My original questions one and three were condensed to my question number two below, which focuses on the dimensions of humanizing pedagogy in my classroom and my students.

Question 1

How do students and teacher come to understand issues of self in a poetry writing workshop taught in humanizing ways?

I was always interested in issues of self and poetry's role in aiding expression of the self as a vehicle to better understand the self. This research question emerged out of my students' articulations about how they saw themselves at the beginning of the class. I was hurt and overwhelmed by their negative self-images, and I wanted to explore ways to help them address these self-images through the writing of poetry. Exploration of this question required focusing on the various ways one's critical consciousness developed about the self over the course of the writing and human interaction. I was interested in what factors influenced my students' perceptions of self, why they came to accept the view of self when the self-image was so negative. I was interested in how students reacted once they came to the realization that the self they saw was not a self that they wanted to continue being. I explored the various factors that prevented my students from simply choosing or adopting a more positive image of self. Finally, I looked at how students began to reshape and redefine their self-images through their writing and dialogue.

The second half of this question focused in on my own understandings of self. I originally thought the self I would be developing was my self as an individual, but I gradually realized that it was my teacher self and identity that would be the main focus of this question. My interactions with my students, my comments on their poetry, the letters I wrote to them, and my own reflections forced me to re-examine who I was as a teacher, what I believed good teaching was, and my roles as teacher in the classroom. This question focused on the differences in how I saw myself as a teacher prior to the class, the changes I experienced during the class, and my view of self after the class ended.

Question 2

What are some of the critical features of humanizing pedagogy in a poetry writing workshop?

The primary focus for this question was to describe the process of setting up and actualizing a humanizing pedagogy. At the center of this question was my emerging understanding of what humanizing pedagogy meant, and more importantly what it meant to experience and live it in my classroom. After each aspect of my humanizing pedagogy was articulated and rationalized based on my theoretical knowledge and most importantly the lives of my students, I still had the dilemma of how to change my practice. What theory came to mean for me based on this particular classroom was one way that I came to own theory and develop my pedagogy.

Another challenge was to describe what went on in the workshop and how student lives, pedagogy, teacher, and theory came together to form a curriculum. What exactly did my classroom become and what were teacher and student doing that made this a humanizing experience needed to be explained. In addition to describing process, the thought processes of the teacher setting up the classroom and the dilemmas faced had to be examined so that other teachers and researchers could reflect on and modify their own practice in the future. The various roles I had from class to class, student to student, poem to poem, dialogue to dialogue, were a major feature that was examined in the exploration of this question.

In my mind, this question also implied that I was going to have to pay attention to how I created an environment where issues of alienation, emancipation, critical social awareness and change could be explored and understood by teacher and students working together. This question also involved making the distinction between the actions,

behaviors, written and spoken comments I or a typical poetry teacher would have made and the actions, behaviors, and comments I made as a humanizing poetry teacher. It required my close textual analysis of student writing as well as the entire writing process from inspiration, to pre-writing, writing, to each revision of the poem. My interaction with students and their poetry was under close scrutiny because the one on one verbal and written dialogue about the poems was where a great deal of my teaching took place in the class.

Gaining access

Despite being a teacher in the school, this study was in jeopardy of never taking place. The university checks and balance system ran quite smoothly, as did the County research approval process, which only required me to alter the language in the student consent form. Most of the delays I experienced were in my own school. My resource teacher expressed concerns to the principal because she did not agree with Freire and was worried that I was going to try to force the kids to talk and write about oppression and racism when the kids just wanted to write about trees or love. I understood her concern because I was prepped well by my committee members who informed me of this possible misread of my work, so I was able to convince her that my political and social agendas were not the driving force of the class.

The largest hurdle came from my Principal who had agreed for me to do the study in 2002. However, after I read poetry at an after school poetry reading he changed his mind. I was given a written warning in my file because the poems read to students contained the word breast in reference to students not covering themselves enough, the word orgasm referring to stereotypes about large black men, and the word breast in

reference to a love poem about my wife. The language and sexual references were deemed inappropriate and I was told to contact a union representative, which I never did. Despite what he thought was going to be an endless stream of phone calls from parents and upset students, he only got one parent call, two students repeated what I said and two teachers told him they were upset. I understand the potential for my poems to have had a much worse public reaction and that I was lucky. After the incident, I thought everything had been resolved until the end of the year, when I found out that I was not going to be able to teach the creative writing course. Though the reason in the school paper was staffing issues, he and I knew the real reason was it was his way of punishing me for my poems. He hurt me in the only way he could, which was to take the class and delay my research. In the fall, the class began with a different teacher and students were outraged, so the school paper wrote an article. I went along with the staffing excuse, which showed him I was willing to take my medicine. I do not believe student dissatisfaction was the new teacher's fault. Students just expected me and without me, they began to drop the course and enrollment numbers the next year were so low the course was in jeopardy again because they told their friends not to take the class since it was not fun.

At the end of the 2002-03 school year, I went back to my Principal to ask permission to teach the course. Actually, I wasn't asking, I told him I needed to know if he was going to let me teach the course or not by March, so that I could transfer schools to do my research and teach the course somewhere else. I realize, of course, how slim the chances were of being able to transfer to a school where a teacher had not already laid claim to the course, but I could not stay at this school with no chance of completing my research. As luck would have it, he agreed to let me teach the course. However, at the

end of the year, they cancelled the course because only ten students had enrolled, and at least twenty were needed to allocate a teacher to the class. I quickly came up with an alternative solution, which was to teach my five classes as stipulated in my contract, but teach a sixth class (creative writing) for free so the school no longer needed to allocate a teaching position. After making me sign a letter saying I was not being forced to teach six classes, but doing this willingly, the course was reinstated. However, after the counselors found out the course was cancelled; they had given the students new schedules. I had to sit with the head counselor, while she pulled the old schedules and we put the ten students back in the course. I then went and told students (who I knew loved to write) about the course and they went to sign up, which was how I ended up with sixteen students. However, each of those students were told they could not take the course because the other counselors had not been informed that the course was available again, so I had to walk each of them down and have the head counselor add them to the class by hand. I capped the course at sixteen because I knew with a sixth class, I could not take on an additional thirty students. With the course finally set, I was able to begin the study in the fall of 2003. This study was conducted during the 2003-04 school year. I had the creative writing class first period, which met at 7:25 in the morning every day for the entire school year. Seeing the students this frequently provided me with opportunity to develop relationships with each of them over the year long study. Studying my students and teaching for an entire school year also represents a unique strength to my research because I was able to collect a wealth of data, and come to understand teacher and student development over time.

The School

This study was conducted in a high school in one of Maryland's more affluent counties. Despite the large numbers of students living in upper middle class homes, there was also a large population living in apartments and roughly five percent on the free and reduced lunch program. There were close to 2,100 students enrolled at the time of the study. The diverse student body was close to 20% White, close to 20% Black, close to 20% Asian, close to 20% Hispanic, while the other 20% were made of students from 201 foreign countries. While the school itself was quite diverse and prides itself on diversity, the classes lacked that same diversity. The regular or on level classes were predominately Black and Hispanic, with a few white and Asian faces, while the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses were predominately White and Asian, with some Black and even fewer Hispanic faces sprinkled in. The most evenly represented classes were the Honors classes because they had fairly equal distributions, but the girls outnumbered the boys by almost 1.5 to 1. There has been an ongoing struggle to push capable minority students into the higher level classes. The average SAT score for the school is just under 1100 (although white students had the highest scores, closely followed by Asian students, then a 50 point gap for Black students and another 20 point gap for Hispanic students). The school is in the top three hundred in the nation according to Newsweek's Jay Mathews challenge index. While many students have bought into the school and are quite successful, close to a quarter of the students have not bought in and find themselves on the ineligible list (below a 2.0 GPA) each quarter. Too often this list has been over populated with male minorities.

Participants

The Advanced Composition course was an English elective reserved for seniors, and the occasional junior who could convince their counselor that they loved writing and needed to be in the course. The students in this course did not receive English credits; they only got an elective credit, which most did not need for graduation. The course was listed in the course description booklet as a creative writing course aimed at helping students develop their writing in different genres and forms. Some of the students selected the course because they just loved to write and wanted to improve, and other students selected the course because they knew that I was teaching it.

In each chapter, the students will be discussed in more detail along with their poetry, their views about themselves, and their views of the world around them. Below is a brief reference guide to ground the reader.

I had two juniors and fourteen seniors. The two juniors were Jasmine, whose family was from Africa and had traditional values for young girls and were quite religious, and Mary, a Caucasian female, whose mother was intent on making her dress more like a classy woman instead of the jeans and baggy shirts she felt comfortable in. Jasmine is the primary focus in the chapter on removing disempowering ideas, beliefs and images, while Mary is discussed mainly as evidence of how student issues are wide spread, so her comments usually echo other students.

The senior boys were:

- § Hank our resident song writer and political activist.
- § Marlon, who was our upper middle class black male with tremendous parental pressure to perform despite his learning disabilities and past poor grades from his last school.
- § Jesse was our affluent black male who is constantly skipping classes, failing classes and on the ineligible list.

- § Ayo, who was our African male who had a few run ins with the police in his youth, was being recruited by football teams, and was blessed with an analytical mind but cursed with poor grammar and the need to get everything done as quickly as possible.
- § Adam who was our white male who does not fit in with the cool high school crowd because he was physically awkward, in the band and a writer.
- § Mark, who was a creative person at heart, but struggled to stay awake in his, classes long enough to maintain more than a low C average.
- § The last senior male chose not to participate in the study.
Most of the males are discussed in the empowerment chapter, and their letters to me are discussed in the understanding student chapter and when student and teacher growth are discussed in the final chapter.

The senior girls were:

- § Desi, our troubled Bengali who hated middle school, high school and home. Desi becomes the focus case in the love and dialogue chapter and the lens to focus the student letters in the student growth chapter. The other female students' voices are focused on during the poetry readings and in the lack of self love discussion. Peggy was our struggled with self esteem about weight.
- § Laura was a white honor roll student that was bored in school unless the class and teacher made her stop reading the books she would bring from home to keep her occupied in class.
- § Sondra was a transfer student from an alternative school for students with substance abuse problems.
- § Lucy was an Asian American student who despite being very intelligent (as evident by her high test scores), chose to come to school late, skip classes, and do just enough to pass her classes.
- § Susan was a white female worried about fitting in with what was popular.
- § Amy was an Asian student who dropped out of the study half way through the year because her counselor made a mistake and she had to take another class or else not graduate.

Since this is an action research study, the last person being studied is “Mr. Daniel”. At the beginning of this study, I had been teaching in the school for eight years, nine if you include a year of student teaching. I had taught ninth grade and eleventh grade English and the creative writing course twice. I had to give up the creative writing course three years go because I wanted to teach Advanced Placement and was told one teacher could not have all the jewels in the department. Since I had already taught the

creative writing class, and would be the first African American male to teach this difficult course, I gave up my creative writing class. At school, I had the reputation of being a lot of fun in class because I liked to entertain students by teasing them, making up crazy nick names for most of them, telling jokes, making the book discussion fun, and not being afraid to laugh at myself. I also had the reputation of being a teacher students could come to with problems of sensitive nature like boyfriend-girlfriend issues, pregnancy, sex, perceived racism, and troubles with teachers or parents. The fun loving, caring teacher persona made students tolerate my other persona, which was one of the teachers who traditionally gave the most work, the longest essays, and was liberal with D's or lower when the work didn't meet his specifications. The student rationalization about the heavy work load became 'he gives us so much work because he cares about us'. Over the eight years, I became a very popular teacher. I sponsored and occasionally performed with the award winning step team, I ran the weight room, I sponsored the literary magazine, I wrote a book and ended up on television, and I was selected by the class of 2001 to be the graduation speaker. The popularity and success at the school added pressure on me to provide an outstanding experience for the students in the class. I was vulnerable because I had so many new ideas and philosophies to explore, but risking not sticking strictly with the teaching practices that had made me so successful was scary for me. I wanted to improve my teaching and find ways to make poetry more meaningful in the lives of my students. I also had the ambitious goal of helping my students improve their lives by seeing their own agency, reconstructing their images of self, and forming close relationships between student and teacher through dialogue. I did not know if I was going to be able to achieve any of these goals, or if their poetry would lend itself to any

of these goals. I was in un-chartered waters and wanted to use theory and my classroom experience to provide me with anchors to ground my pedagogy for the rest of my career.

Sources of Data, Collection and Data Analysis

I would like other teachers with similar concerns to be able to follow my research method. My goal in this next section is to explain the nature of my data sources, the frequency of their collection, my collection methods, my analysis of the data, as well as the challenges I faced during the process. The key to my research process was the simultaneous data collection and analysis throughout the entire school year.

Audio tapes of poetry readings

An important piece of data was the conversations held once a week where I facilitated a discussion about two or three student written and recited poems. Being an integral piece of the discussion, I had no time to take notes so I carried a cassette recorder in my pocket, with the microphone wire under my shirt and the microphone clipped on my top button. After recording the entire discussion, I labeled and locked the tape and cassette player in my closet until the end of the day. I gave myself the charge at the outset of the study to have the cassette transcribed before the next week's poetry reading, so that I would not become overwhelmed with tapes. Sticking to this goal went well for the first few months, but inevitably, I fell behind one week due to my other classes and one week due to home life. Playing catch up was a miserable and frustrating experience. I also felt guilty for not transcribing and thinking about the tapes because I felt I was letting my students down or wasting our time by not reflecting on the tape to improve my teaching and our learning. Once I climbed out of the hole, I stayed on schedule for the rest of the year.

Weekly transcribing was essential to the research process because it allowed me the opportunity to recall voices and conversation when multiple voices clouded the tape. It allowed me to reflect on the conversation, search for themes across student responses and discussions, and reflect on what I was saying to my students and why. Listening to the tapes and reading the transcripts helped me see where I missed opportunities to make points and plan future comments to my students to address those missed teachable moments. Basically, my weekly plans were influenced by my analysis of my teaching on the tapes. Cochran-Smith and Lytle¹⁰⁸ offer several ways to make teacher research methodology rigorous. They want the research questions to emanate from day to day experience. One way I met this rigor was to formulate new questions and plans from my daily and weekly reviews of the transcripts.

Once I had a transcription complete, I went through my next phase of analysis. I turned the transcript into a story and made it read like a play. By play, I do not mean I created fiction, I added the he said, and she said, that resembled dialogue one would read in a novel or see in a play. I did this to give the transcript the more human feel that the conversation in the classroom had. It was the best way I knew to capture the emotion and human spirit of myself and my students' interactions. The sterile transcript was not sufficient for me to convey my students or me. In order to do this, I also had to add in my thinking and rationale for the comments I made during the discussions. Why I challenged students, and why I asked the questions I asked them was the most essential piece I added. The addition of my intent helped me when I went into my next phase of analysis, which was to connect my intent and comments to my efforts to have the lived experience of a humanizing pedagogy in my classroom. I had to look for patterns in my

¹⁰⁸ Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1990.

comments, patterns in what I understood my goals to be for each comment, and how I believed my comments were meant to help my students develop their critical consciousness and poetry. Once this step was completed, I selected the conversations that best illustrated a dimension of humanizing pedagogy to include in the manuscript.

Student Poetry

No surprise in poetry writing class, the largest data set I had was the poetry that my students wrote. Each student was on a contract to turn in two poems every week. I staggered the days of the week each student's work was due to allow myself time to read and respond to each poem carefully. Each day, I went home and read my students' poetry. I wrote my comments on their poetry and then placed all of the poems in a folder. Every morning, my first stop was the copy room. I photo copied all the poems and my comments and placed them in a separate folder and returned the originals to my students each day. If the copier was jammed, which created a frequent problem or if I knew I was running late, I scanned the poems and comments into the computer to make sure that my students received feedback in a timely fashion. Once I got the scanned or photocopied poems home, I made a file for each student with their name and pseudonym on top. I dated and filed every poem they wrote for the entire year in this manner. Filing their poems became problematic when they forgot to put names on poems and I could not file the poems for that day, which created more work. Students' files on average contained forty poems. The volume of paper I had to store for the fifteen students doubled and in some cases tripled when I counted the revisions they made to various poems, which I stapled behind each original version. The paper load was not a burden because I am used to the volume as an English teacher; I was just not prepared for having to keep all of the

work all year because I normally would have just passed the papers back and forgotten about them.

Forgetting about the papers now seemed to be a major flaw in my teaching prior to this class. Keeping their poetry and reviewing their work all year made me a more thoughtful and insightful reader and teacher. My analysis of their work helped me craft what I viewed to be more helpful comments on their artistic merit because I had access to their recurring writing problems. I know that having all of their work and analyzing their poetry on a daily basis helped me to make more humanizing comments and push them in their critical reflections about self and in their development of a critical consciousness. When I read a new poem, I had the advantage of seeing that poem in context of their body of work, and the relationship I had built with them in class. I felt more confident in challenging them when I saw disempowering language, or negative self images, or self loathing in their writing because my analysis made me believe I knew them through their writing. My daily analysis of their poetry allowed my comments not to be read in a vacuum. I could carry on conversations with my comments and refer to other writing and comments, which made my teaching more fluent and loving. Daily analysis was an important factor in helping me become more invested in my students' lives, care about them as writer and love them as humans.

After the daily analysis, I went into a second phase of analysis of each student's poetry. I sat and read their entire body of work for the course as if it were a book. I put their topics into categories and also grouped poems with similar themes. My goal was to get a sense of what the student was about by understanding their writing as a whole. During this phase of analysis, I also took notes on my comments to the student over the

course of the year. I noted the types of things I said, what comments were repeated, and what questions I asked them to organize my thinking. After looking and taking notes on all of their work and all of my comments, I tried to piece together their story of growth and development in a narrative form based on their writing.

The third phase of poem analysis was to read all of the students' work collectively. I was searching for common themes in their writing as well as common themes in my comments to them. I simply started with one student and broke their work down by topic, theme, and my comments and separated the poems into piles. Then I read the next student and placed each of their poems in one of the piles, and if a new topic or theme emerged, I made a new pile. After several days, I managed to place all of the poems into their designated piles on my basement floor. The next step was to go through each pile and see what the story was across my students. This made it easier for me to determine which of their themes and issues were the major themes that had to be written about in the study. This method allowed me to move fluently between students and their poems when writing the manuscript.

Informal Interviews

I didn't intentionally set out to conduct any structured or unstructured interviews of my students. I did not think of them as subjects who had answers to my predetermined questions. My informal interviews took the form of one-on-one discussion that took place in the classroom, at students' computer in the lab, or at the table in front of the computer lab. If I initiated a particular discussion it was because I had questions about their poem I had read the night before. My questions were not simple interpretation or usage questions because those I could just ask in passing. The questions that warranted

me calling them to the table or going to their computer were more serious questions. Examples of more serious questions were: to discuss an idea or perspective they had that I found problematic, to check to see if I understood their view or perspective before I challenged them on it, to ask them to write more about a subject they touched upon in their work that was very powerful in its potential to inform critical awareness, and to discuss how they were doing at home, in school, socially, emotionally, or in life in general because I noticed they were down or acting strangely. These conversations were a key time for relationship building and I tried to make sure that I had them with each student as frequently as possible. I did not record or take notes during the conversation because it seemed too awkward, but I sat down afterwards and reconstructed the conversation during my planning period, which followed the class. So much of the background, personal, emotional, and philosophical information about each student was gleaned during these conversations. My students also initiated many of these conversations. Sometimes they asked to talk about my comments on their poem and how they had sparked their thinking about self, and other times they just needed someone to talk to and I was the person they trusted and selected. Without these informal talks, and my willingness to allow time for them in the curriculum, I am not sure that the depth of information about each student would have been possible. These data were the data that came from natural human interaction between teacher and student.

To analyze the data, I put my notes about specific poems in their folders next to the poem, so I had a more complete picture of the significance of the poem in the folder. The more notes, discussions, and revisions of a poem, the more I knew that the poem might be an important piece of the student's story. If the conversation was about issues

of self, then I typed my notes into the computer under a thematic file or a file for notes on a particular student. I used the data to tell the students complete story and fill their lives in around the poems they were writing. They were my way of letting the reader know what I knew about each of the students and then how my knowledge of them dictated my actions, comments, and pedagogical decisions in the classroom.

Student and Teacher Letters

I had not intended for letter writing to be a significant part of the data in this study; however it emerged as a major piece. Letter writing began on the first day of class when I asked my students to write about poetry and their expectations for the course. Of course, I read and categorized their responses, but I ended up writing letters back to each and every student as a way to begin teaching, and also to share my goals and expectations with them. Letter writing grew from there to include an end of the semester mid year letter I wrote to each student and they responded to, a letter I wrote to the entire class and their responses, as well as the letters they wrote to me at the end of the year and my responses that I hand delivered before they graduated. The letters I wrote were analyzed to understand my attempts to promote dialogue, critical reflection, the challenging of negative self-images, the building of relationships, and the development of a humanizing pedagogy. The letters they wrote were analyzed to better understand their group and individual perspectives and concerns. Like their poetry, I first read their letter to understand the student and understand their dilemmas by pulling themes out of their letters. I also read the letters from all the students to determine themes across students. The other essential piece of the analysis of student letters was to make sure I understood

them well enough to carefully and strategically craft my response to them, so that I could promote empowerment, self esteem, self affirmation, self reflection, self love and hope.

End of Data Collection

Once the class and data collection ended, I spent the entire summer writing the narrative of the course. I pulled from all of the data sources to tell what I saw as the critical stories of the course. I wrote 250 pages. I wrote the stories of the first day of class, the most pivotal poetry readings, the day they chose to create their own literary magazine, the day they discussed romantic love, the day they talked about controlling their destiny, the day I found out many of them did not love themselves, and stories about the day they told me what the course meant to their lives. I also wrote up some of the key cases, which included the growth process of certain students. I wrote about the dramatic changes that Desi, Jasmine, and Sondra went through and included all of the relevant poems, discussions, and letters. I also wrote the narratives around key issues of empowerment, critical literacy, and love. I wrote up my data, as the colloquial phrase goes, making sure to include all relevant poems, dialogues, comments, notes, and letters for every single story. I wrote so much I thought I had to be close to finished with the entire dissertation. That was until my advisor told me, after applauding rich data and portrayal of teacher and student, that I still had not done any data analysis. I was naïve and thought I had more than I did, but I also had more than we both realized. Writing up those stories was a critical step for me. I had all of the raw material I needed to write the dissertation in those two hundred pages. Had I tried to write those stories once time had elapsed, I would have had a nearly impossible task on my hands. Having the entire school year written out in narrative form and in separate documents by topics gave me a

vehicle to figure out what exactly the school year was a story of. I had something to read that included teacher and student dialogue and perspectives, which allowed me to pull together themes across the stories and critical issues.

The next step in the analysis process was to go back through the stories once I grouped and rearranged them and become analytic about what had taken place in my classroom. I had looked for themes and patterns across the year. I was able to develop assertions grounded in my data yet connected to some larger theoretical ideas. For instance, I was able to begin to make more claims and draw conclusions about what a humanizing pedagogy was in my classroom and how teacher and students were able to grow and develop their critical consciousness in that classroom. The last step in my analysis process was to begin to explain how my classroom experiences shaped my understanding of theory, but also spoke to, challenged, and informed theory.

The following four chapters represent data analyzed using the methodology articulated in this chapter. I begin with a chapter about how I first came to know my students and their particular issues, which shifted my focus and pedagogy for the course. The next two chapters clearly lay out my dimensions of humanizing pedagogy by taking a close look at the classroom interactions between my students and me revolving around their poetry. The fourth data analysis chapter examines student and teacher letters at the end of the course, in order to reveal both student and teacher transformation from a year long poetry course taught in humanizing ways.

Chapter IV

Understanding Students through their Understandings of Self

Introduction

The major goal of this chapter is to provide a sense of who my students were in terms of how they saw themselves at the beginning of my high school creative writing course. I accomplish this goal by explaining my efforts to come to know them as fellow humans and through the details of their lives disclosed to me during class, in their writing, and through our conversations about their writing. This chapter, in many ways, is not only about who my students were, but about how coming to know their particular problems with their senses of self worth affected me as a person, through my actions and voice in the classroom, my goals for the course, and what I viewed as the function of poetry in the lives of my students. Finally, this chapter reveals how the curriculum and pedagogical approach for the course evolved through and because of the knowledge I gained about my student, a knowledge that demanded I adapt as teacher, planner, and fellow learner.

Coming to know my students

There are many ways teachers come to know their students. In my school the typical practices are name games, note cards with hobbies listed, and memorization of seating charts. For me, once the learning names hurdle was overcome, knowing my students meant more than just familiarity with their likes, dislikes, prior knowledge of subject area, involvement in extra-curricular activities, and family background; it meant more than naming the demographics of eight girls and six boys, or to be more specific, three black boys, two white boys, one Asian boy and one Asian girl, one Bengali girl, one

black girl, and four white girls. I felt that a far more valuable means of knowing students than the categorical entailed the process of forging relationships with them as individuals and as a community. Coming to know my students was a lived experience and process not a memorization of names, faces, and county demographics.

Freire asks, “How can I be an educator if I do not develop in myself a caring and loving attitude toward the student, which is indispensable on the part of one who is committed to teaching and to the education process itself?”¹⁰⁹ Freire later begins to define this caring and loving attitude by respecting the student’s identity, dignity, autonomy, identity, and humanity. Critics, like Darder¹¹⁰ and others, have also advocated for teaching to be an act of love. I am drawn to Hook’s definition of love in teaching. She argues that love is the combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust. This loving attitude allows the teacher to learn from students, respond better to individualized problems, affirm student emotional well being, and form life-long bonds as a result of this recognition of who they are.¹¹¹

In order for me to develop relationships with students, I needed to respect my students’ identities; I needed to respect their representations of their identities. I felt I needed to understand how my students viewed themselves. There were many different identities that my students chose for themselves. Many were positive and many fit within the popularity strata of our high school. I was interested in their self- image because how they saw themselves seemed to constitute a more authentic portrayal than either their demographics or my view of them as their teacher. I was curious about how they saw themselves physically and emotionally. Though I did get to know the many facets of

¹⁰⁹ Freire 1998 p84.

¹¹⁰ Darder 2003.

¹¹¹ Hooks 2000.

each student, for this study, I decided to focus only on how they see themselves in relation to having power, agency, freedom, and a sense of belonging: Given my affinities towards critical literacy, liberation, empowerment issues, feminism, student growth, and identity issues, these questions were very important to me because I cared about my students' personal and social well being. In addition, their answers to these questions about their views of themselves were overwhelmingly negative, which affected me deeply, so I made the choice to focus intently on the more troubling aspects of their identities.

Overview of student self images

How my students viewed themselves encompassed a wide range of images. The focus of this chapter is the negative view of themselves they all felt to one degree or another. Across gender, racial, religious, and cultural lines, my students had what seemed to me to be disempowering, disabling, and paralyzing self-images. I gathered information about how they saw themselves from reading the poetry, reading their letters they wrote to me about their expectations for the course, their comments during class discussions of their classmates' poetry, and informal conversations with individual students about their writing and life in general. They saw themselves as either "inadequate," "worthless," "powerless," "isolated" or "unlovable". They also believed that they were trapped in these states, and that the possibility of changing their view of self was non-existent. They allowed what they perceived as an unchangeable, inflexible world to impose its will on them, and found it safer to hide their true selves in interactions with most strangers and authority figures. Numerous factors, forces, and people had helped deliver and reinforce the message "you are not adequate" so

powerfully to them throughout their lives in school, that they had “chosen” to accept it and adjust their lives, beliefs, and actions accordingly.

The impact of their negative self images

As I came to learn how my students viewed themselves, I was hurt by the negative self-views which were crippling them. I did not enjoy seeing people so young giving up on themselves and internalizing the belief that they were to blame for not being happy in life. While learning about them and forming relationships with them during the first few weeks of the semester, I came to not only care for, but love, my students. I didn't want to see anyone I loved in pain, struggling to find a place in school or in society. To watch my students endure these negative self images day after day, without helping them redefine themselves by reshaping their own identities, would have been depressing for me. I could not feel that I had done my job as an educator if I did not try to help them. It is very difficult to express how much their self-assessments bothered me, rendered even more troubling by how radically their views of self contrasted with my views of them; I saw so many positives and such potential in them, but their skepticism kept them from seeing it, and from believing me when I told them what I saw. I was frustrated and angry that people so young seemed on the verge of self hatred and a disempowered existence.

Upon learning about their struggles with self acceptance, I developed goals for the course that situated students' lives at the center of the curriculum. I also began to develop different goals for myself. The course was no longer just a poetry course, where the perfection of poetic craft was the only desired outcome. The class became a place where we worked to perfect poetic craft, all the while using our poems as a vehicle for

exploration of self and as a means to examine and challenge negative self images. When I envisioned the course and this study, I always wanted the class to be about student voice, exploration of self through writing about issues that mattered most to each individual student. Critical literacy and issues of empowerment were integral to my thinking about this process. But, it wasn't until I learned about my students' particular issues involving self image that these theoretical ideas for the course took on real meaning. Their real lives, providing a human context, are what grounded the theories. It is important to emphasize that both the curriculum and my pedagogy evolved due to their particular problem with self image. I had to revise objectives and desired learning outcomes after I learned who my students were. The class was not about where I thought the students needed to be, but where they seemed to need to go based on their disclosures to me during the first few weeks of the course. I honestly felt the need to adapt curriculum and pedagogy to their existing dynamics in order to do justice to them as humans.

Through their writing of poetry, my written and verbal comments about their poetry, and both group and personal dialogue, I wanted to try to develop their voices in such a way as to give them more confidence not only in themselves, but also in their ability to express their concerns, and in their knowledge that they had a vehicle in poetry to express who they really were. One of my goals, then, was to not only facilitate this self expression, but more importantly to also affirm who they were as individuals. I believed I needed to show them in multiple ways that I not only accepted them, but that I also valued them. I believed they did not feel as though they were being affirmed enough or at all by society, school, or by themselves, so my acceptance of them might initiate a

way to help them begin to accept and value themselves. A critical literacy approach in this course would now include the process of not only coming to understand where these negative self images came from, but also challenging their underlying assumptions and developing new self images. Their revised self-images might allow my students to feel adequate within themselves and within their various social settings such as school, home, work, and local, national, and global communities. My role, as I interacted with both students and their writing, would be to offer hope and provide new ways of looking at and thinking about self. 'Empowerment' in this creative writing class became a process of challenging disempowering forces in their lives and belief systems, so that they could develop a sense of hope, a loss of fear, and a gradual acceptance of their own agency as instrument of change. My goals were to continue to share my views, passions, fears, self image, and life with my students in order for them to come to know me and trust me; they could then feel more comfortable disclosing personal information to me in their writing, which would in turn help me to help them develop and transform their self image. I would need to carefully watch for the invitations they extended me into their lives, because these would present critical moments to come to know more about them and how they viewed themselves. I would also have to make sure that my comments in class, on their writing, and to them individually would not only help them improve as writers, but also push them in their thinking about self, which hopefully could result in positive growth for them.

The Self as Powerless

Though many students like Amy, Lucy, and Sondra said they felt powerless for numerous reasons, at this point, I will focus on Desi and Hank because they represent the

major ways my students felt powerless. I choose Desi because she represented the range of filters other students used to interpret their lack of power to make any changes in their lives, which led Desi to accept and play an insignificant role in her own life. Desi's poems about her parents revealed, because she was a girl, that they treated her as a second class citizen and expected her to stay home until she married a "nice Bengali man". Her poems about school described it as a "prison" which used "fake lessons", "fake teachers", and illusions of success as bars to hold students into the fantasy that the world is a big happy place with real possibilities. I remember telling her as she walked into class one day that she looked happy, which was a far cry from her usual dreary sullen face. I was curious to see if she was aware that she was actually smiling for once, and I wanted her to know that I was aware of her mood changes. She denied being happy and made a sarcastic comment to me. I thought I had been wrong about her, but the next week when she turned in her three assigned poems on topics of student choice, she gave me part of her electronic journal instead, which had a section written about me. She wrote about how "Mr. Daniel told me I looked happy the other day and I gave him my usual sarcastic response. The problem was that I was happier, but I did not want a teacher to know they understood me, so I shot him down." Instead of me keeping my distance from her, which she said was her intent; I just kept trying to understand her, which seemed to impress her even more.

She wrote, "Not many adults have ever wanted to learn about me, to take time and understand the real me, not the image, nor the color, nor the culture that I physically represent". As I read her words in her journal, my finger stopped at that section, and I looked up to see her smiling at me as she watched me read about me actually trying to get

to know her. My desire to learn about her was rewarded with both a nice compliment and a breakthrough: she decided to make a small door for me in the walls she had built up for teachers and so many adults in her life. It was at this point that I found out how much she had hated middle school because no one, including her friends, parents, or school officials, had believed her claims of sexual harassment on the bus, which had made her feel powerless. I found out she hated high school and the teachers (she was not alone - Lucy also had several poems denouncing teachers and school because they seemed to be “wasting her time”, and as a student she did not have the power to change the system). Desi hated the fact that she had no power to prevent how her parents treated her. She hated that her parents did not know who she was or what she liked. She believed that if she told them who she really was and stopped being a ‘fake’ Desi to survive at home, they would probably disown her. I also found out that she hated the fact that most nights she just sat in her room and cried until she fell asleep. She also told me that she had tried to commit suicide prior to this class. She said that half of the tears were for the pain she felt and the other tears were because she could not do anything about any of her problems. All of this resentment and anger she harbored left her feeling powerless and insignificant; her only defense was to withdraw from people and keep those who tried to get close to her at bay with sarcasm, pessimism, and fatalism. As long as she continued to see herself this way, she said, she could not rule out another suicide attempt, but she did not want to do that again. The importance of helping Desi develop a new self-image and a sense of agency could not be any more clear, immediate, or critical to me as her teacher.

Hank was a student who seemed to be very much the opposite of Desi because he had found a voice. Ironically though, he too felt powerless. He tried to exercise his political voice in the after school club called Students for Social Change, through his anti-Iraq war music, and through his poetry that attacked capitalism, police brutality, and racial insensitivity. Hank, like so many students, ran up against the obstructive power of a school principal and a set of school laws he knew too little about to achieve many of his goals. He was frustrated and tired of not being able to make large-scale school or societal changes at his age. He was speaking out, being heard by very few, and in his eyes affecting none. “What is the point? Nothing is going to change. I’m not ready to give up on the injustices in the world, but I alone can’t do much of anything. I can’t really make a difference and the world will just continue to be as messed up as it has always been.” Having someone so young ready to throw in the towel and silence his political voice was not acceptable to me. I talked to him about his poems, ways to hone his social critiques, and potential outlets for his message. Our journey was very difficult as we ran into censorship and other forces attempting to silence Hank’s voice. What I needed Hank to learn was that his voice was not worthless, and needed to be heard by both, as he called them, “the oppressive capitalist establishment” and the “victims of poverty, racism, sexism, genocide, and the police”. I wanted him to see that there was hope, and that he had the power to affect his readers. Maybe if his poems helped sway the thinking of the members of this class, he could regain hope and a sense of power. I had to make sure he never gave up on his political voice and that I pushed him to keep writing.

The Self as Inadequate

I chose Sondra to examine as the representative of this group of students because she, like Desi and Hank seemed to be on the verge of self destruction prior to this class. I also selected Sondra and Peggy because being inadequate was a problem that plagued them for the entire year, whereas other students in this category like Mary and Susan were bothered by feelings of inadequacy less frequently.

Sandra came to believe that she was inadequate and flawed through a process of life experiences. She was new to the school after spending a year in an alternative school for students who had drug addictions. She came to me cognizant of all the negative things about herself that there were, because she was forced to see herself as weak during her recovery program. She said that “They told me I had to see my addiction as my fault and my weakness and not blame others, so I could get better.” She also spent a year with her father who kept her under strict lock and key so that she would not relapse and blame him this time, as she had blamed her mother, who also had drug issues. Disclosing that she first learned about drug use through her mother was very difficult for Sondra; she had to stop writing that poem three separate times before she could complete it, and it took her another week before she would let me see it. Living with her religious grandparents, she believed she should be humble and grateful, quiet and respectful, because, she said, she felt like a “burden because they kinda had to have to take her”. Sondra spent so much time telling me everything that she was not and was not good at, I finally asked her what she *was* good at. I wanted her to begin to focus on the positive aspects of who she was, so she would not be consumed with thoughts of being weak and inadequate. The question visibly threw her off balance and she said, “outside of art, I don’t know. I am

full of fear and self doubt, and I know I have to be critical of myself to avoid slipping up again.” At the beginning of the year, she told me that she wanted to use poetry as therapy and to “learn about who I am, what I believe, and if possible, through refining my poetry, I would like to refine myself. I don’t want to be ordinary.”

I could see from her insightful comments in class and her array of creative talents that she was far from an “ordinary” student in this school. The problem was that she seemed conditioned to not see something special when she looked at herself; she saw only a deficit. This contradiction bothered me. I could not stand idly by for an entire semester doing nothing. I saw too much potential in her and cared about her too much to allow her to go through life seeing herself as inadequate. It would have been wrong for me to sit back and remain neutral in her life. Since I was already writing letters back to students after their initial assignment, which was to write about their expectations for the course, I used this opportunity to not only respond to her course needs, but to what I viewed as her self-image needs as well. Once I came to know and respect Sondra as a person, I felt I had to begin to affirm the person she was to help her see herself as more than adequate. I wrote to her that, “The complaint about the overuse of the word ‘I’ is also ironic. If your poetry is your therapy, who else is it going to be about? How can the ‘I’ not be dominant? Sounds like avoidance to me, which can only delay therapy. Imagine a poet/person in therapy trying to avoid therapy by not talking about themselves. You said you would like to learn about you and to refine your poetry and yourself simultaneously. Great! Noble! I love it! But, in the same breath, you said you want to find something in yourself worth expressing. How in the world are you ever going to refine yourself and your poetry unless you realize first that EVERYTHING in you is

worth expressing and writing about?" I emphasized that everything in her was important, because I wanted her to see that she was valuable and realize that her life and experiences were neither weaknesses nor reasons to see herself as inadequate. I wanted to suggest the possibility that writing about herself, she might begin to see she wasn't all bad. I also wanted her to see that her past mistakes were not who she was, just things she had done. I was trying to help her value herself by placing herself as the center of attention in her life.

After receiving my letter, she began to come into my classroom during lunch and after school. She seemed interested in getting to know me, perhaps because I saw something special in her and wanted to help her see that same thing in herself. We dialogued and wrote about her feelings of shame and inadequacy about her looks, knowledge, and personality, her love and resentment towards her mother, her relationships with 'bad' men (which, according to her, were her fault for liking them, knowing they were bad), and her 'bad relationships' with 'good' men (for which she blamed herself for treating poorly, even though they were not what she wanted in a mate), her struggles to adopt confidence without conceit, and her struggles to maintain healthy relationships with her female friends, who were jealous or upset with her because she must have not been humble enough in some way.

The message that 'you are inadequate' came in many other forms for many of my students. For Peggy, it was peer teasing about being a little overweight, and coaches not including her in the games even during her senior year. The coach cared more about winning than making the less athletic students feel good. For Ayo, it was being told that he was inadequate by everyone who read one of his grammatically incorrect sentences,

and too often by the police for shoplifting or running out before paying a cab driver. He felt that being six five, black, and 350 pounds was a curse. He felt people in authority were out to get him and, that there was “no love” out there for him, so he had to be careful or “end up shot or stabbed”. He felt he could never be adequate in football because people always expected more from him because he was so big. He just believed that he couldn’t win the game of life fairly, so there was “nothing wrong with cutting corners and getting by”. Do as little as you can to pass and if the A is easy, get it, but if it is too much work, forget it, because “you probably won’t make it anyway” became his motto. His self image was so disabling that he was willing to take risks with the law and his life to get ahead because he believed that under the status quo, he was not meant to succeed in America. I did not want to see a large black male go through life with this self image, not only because he reminded me of the negativity I, too, internalized by being tall, muscular, and black, but also because I did not want to see him claimed by the penal system. In his first letter to me, he wrote “Poetry helps me deal with the hardships in my life. When I’m in a bad mood and don’t feel like being bothered with the rest of the world, I lock myself in my room and write poetry for hours. It calms me down and takes away my anger.” I wanted him to continue using poetry as an outlet to voice his frustrations about powerlessness and appearing inadequate in society’s eyes, so he would not have to resort to venting in violent ways.

The Self as Unlovable

For the students in this group, I focused on Jasmine because she had the most trouble loving herself in the class and her story is a critical case in an upcoming chapter on love and dialogue as aspects of humanizing pedagogy. Jasmine, like Sondra, also saw

poetry as a means to heal. She wrote, “When feeling down, stressed out, troubled, I express my self in poetry. Poetry for me is my medicine. When- ever I’m not feeling up to par or something is bothering me, I write what I am going through and feel 10 times better. My creativity comes through pain.” Jasmine’s medicine metaphor drew me in very quickly. First, because the major feeling she had was that she was inadequate when it came to her physical appearance. Several of the females in the class had body issues as well, but Jasmine’s were the most overt and overwhelming. It also bothered me that she saw poetry as medicine, yet she was holding back in the first few poems that she had given me to read. The poems touched upon issues, but did not go into any real depth. They hinted at her anger or grief, but never really let it out on the page. Again, I used letter writing as a means to push her in her writing and her self image:

“Jasmine, you say poetry is your medicine. Well, then, I would like to challenge you to actually let your poetry actually begin to cure you. Too often your writing has been a placebo. You talk around issues and scratch the surface, but you never really put your true feelings out there and say what is really on your mind. You like to dwell in the stereotypical and the cliché instead of the heart of the matter. You won’t let poetry cure you because you always hold back in your poetry. So often in poems you say she, when the she is you! Stop hiding from your feelings by giving them to another woman in your poems. Take ownership of your feelings so they can begin to cure you. You keep worrying about what people (mom, church) will say when they read your work, but the worry takes away the power and honesty in your poetry, which defuses the curative powers of poetry. You also say much of your poetry is written from pain. Write that pain and spare nothing, once you name it for yourself, it is yours, and you have the power to deal with it as you please. But, don’t stop there - don’t stop at the complaining about pain and situations you face. Let your poems begin to become the place where you also write solutions and resolutions to the pain; then the poems can begin to cure. You say that writing makes you feel 10 times better, but that medicine of poetry is far more potent. You should be feeling 100 times better once you begin to really deal with the issues that cause you pain. Please use this class to write the poems that can be your medicine, that can work the black magic from sacred African roots to heal the beautiful, intelligent young Jasmine who doesn’t believe she is intelligent, beautiful, and blessed.”

I intended for this letter to let her know that the potential for healing was within her grasp. She saw writing as medicine, and so I wanted to let her know that it could work and that I would be there to support her if she had the courage to open up and let herself come through on the page. I also suspected that once she began to write her real feelings and emotions in her poems, she could see herself on the page and think critically about who she was and if she wanted to make changes. I also hoped that I could provide her with comments on those poems, in order to promote more thought about her self image. She needed to understand that the process began with her and that she had the power to make the difference and could take ownership of her healing process. Getting her to see this could help remove the belief that she did not possess the power to change, an important contributor to her feelings of inadequacy.

So much of who Jasmine thought she was seemed to be made up from who Jasmine believed she wasn't. She believed she was not as pretty as the light skinned girls with long hair, as smart as the students in her AP classes, as talented as the other writers she admired, as flexible as the other girls on the pom team, as loveable as the other girls who had boyfriends, as popular as, as good as, and so on and so on. (Another student in the class, Laura, ironically was doing the same thing, by insisting she was not a good writer because people like Jasmine were so much better). Jasmine simply believed that she was not as good as the people she considered to be perfect in various ways. The trouble is that her belief manifested itself in her not loving herself or respecting herself, and not requiring the rest of the world to love and respect her. This self image was dangerous for Jasmine. For example, she could not handle compliments from boys her age. She either believed they were lying, or just saying things in an attempt to use her for

sex. My letter then was also an attempt to affirm who I thought and hoped she would come to believe she was, without any comparisons, qualifications, or ulterior motives. She just needed to hear positives about herself, to allow herself to believe for a moment that those positive images of herself could exist in the minds of others, so maybe then she could name herself, in her own right, in her own image, and not continue to define herself in opposition to traditional images of beauty.

The Self as Worthless

I chose Jesse and Marlon to focus on for this group because their cases were the most troubling for me. The message that as black boys they were not worth much was delivered to these two loudly and clearly by the school system and I made it a priority in the course to challenge their acceptance of this view of self. Jesse seemed to believe in his heart that something was “wrong” with him. His self image was very poor because he had a 1.0 cumulative G.P.A. and had not gone a semester without flunking or losing credit due to too many absences in a course. He was told that he was smart, but something was ‘just wrong with him’. This phrase he memorized and adopted as his only way to understand himself. His administrators, counselors, teachers, parents, coaches, and even the security team had all told him he had the ability, if he could just put his mind to it. After four years of high school, he hadn’t put his mind to his course work yet, and so he was labeled lazy. Lazy has become a nice educational blame deflecting term. It is not the school’s fault; he has the ability and is just not using it. I asked him if he was ever going to flip that magic switch everyone says he had and he said he didn’t know because he was too lazy. I asked if he was too afraid and he said “yes”. His fear was that if he flipped the switch and did great work, then “everyone would have high expectations

{for him} from then on instead of the low expectations {he} enjoy{s}”. His other fear was that he would try to flip the switch and realize he was not as smart as everyone thought, and that he wasn’t lazy at all, just average. Sadly, the only times he had ever had any school success were during a few wrestling seasons. This meant sports was the only thing another young black male was praised for and thus the only carrot to dangle in front of him for motivation. I wanted this class to help serve as another type of motivation for Jesse. My grading scale, which rewarded effort and process instead of poetic perfection, was a perfect way for him to achieve academic success. My class was the only one he had an A in, not because it was easy, but because he made the choice to turn in his poems every week. His writing, his views, his own work were earning him A’s in school. I believe he took pride in his A because it was one of his bragging points when his counselor was checking up on his progress. He told me, “With my A in here, and a little effort in a couple of other classes, I can become eligible”. This belief that he could improve helped Jesse alter the worthless self image he had carried for too long.

For Marlon, the worthless message came from his previous English teacher at his last high school, who told him he was never going to be able to write well. Combine her proclamation with his learning disability, which affected his abilities to spell, organize ideas, retain meaning of complex text, and take accurate notes, and one gets a student who has no confidence in his abilities. His extremely supportive parents had been helping Marlon maintain passing grades, but since he needed so much help, he often didn’t acknowledge his successes as his own. “Oh. My mom helped me with that” became one of his favorite phrases. He came to believe that his own efforts were

worthless and would result in poor grades, so he had to be helped. He had come to rely so much on help from mom in school that the habit spilled over into his life.

I asked him if he considered himself to be a man, independent, mature, responsible, or even equal to his peers, and he answered “no” every time. Seeing a black boy, with special needs, in this state was very sad because he was not going to be able to advocate for himself in life. This self image of being worthless convinced him not to try new things or take too many risks because he was going to fail. I felt he was not ready for life after high school and worse, he knew it, too. One of the most frequent conversations we had was about how worried he was about failing out of college and ruining his life. He was worried because his brother, who was the “smart” one, had not succeeded in college, so he saw the chances of his making it as slim. I talked to him about the power of believing in himself, which was the only way he would make it through the challenges of the collegiate curriculum. It was very difficult for him to believe me and begin to believe in himself because he had not had enough success on his own to build his confidence. I felt I needed to affirm his abilities by being more positive than usual when responding to his poems. Some of his early poems were so poor in diction, organization, and coherence, that I had to talk more about the powerful ideas in his writing than the actual writing itself.

Marlon began to respond positively by showing his poems to his parents *after* he turned them in to me, instead of before, and he actually read some of his poems in class, which he said on the first day he did not want to do. While his self image was being challenged, I feared he was also at risk because he had an image of cool in his head, which he wasn't, but wanted to be. The image included being ‘hard’ (tough), drinking,

not being too smart, conquering numerous women, and being an expert in debating rap, sports, or shoes. By falling short of both high parental expectations and street expectations, Marlon was left feeling like he was worthless. I hoped that as a result of our relationship and his poetry, his sense of self worth would grow. Being close to the cool teacher in school might help him redefine cool and shape who he wanted to be, so with Marlon I felt the added pressure to be a role model. I had to be careful what I said to him, how I behaved around him, and how I advised him because he seemed to be looking to me as a model for black, male, cool, poet, and human, thus I did not want to let him down.

The Isolated “Self” Image

Many of my students in this class felt as though they didn’t fit in. While some students look outwardly at the superficial nature of social structures in high school as the cause of their isolation, my students seemed to look inwardly at themselves as flawed. They seemed to think that because they were so different from the “normal” and “popular” students, that they were supposed to be isolated. To best illustrate this problem, I choose Mark and Adam because they seemed the most confident that they were the reason they did not fit in.

Mark was a student that very few people understood. He was the student who slept in class, failed classes, and yes, he too was told he had potential, so his parents took him in and received a medical diagnosis of Mark having mental health issues. The medicine he was on made him even sleepier and convinced him that he was just never going to be a great student. He wrote poetry, but admitted to me that “nobody really understands my poetry.” I asked him about his close friends, and he said that some of

them get some parts, but they don't stress over the confusing parts because they know him and or can relate. It really bothered him that nobody understood his poetry because he felt he had important things to say to his readers. I asked him how often people woke him up in class to ask him his opinion. He said never. The teachers that woke him, he felt, did it because they had to, not that they wanted to do so. He developed the feeling that maybe he just wasn't that important. He felt trapped in his isolation; no one could understand him well enough to reach out to him and help end it. If he felt isolated in life, I could not let him feel isolated in my poetry class, because poetry was his last refuge. If this poetic voice was not clearly heard and understood after this semester with me, then what might happen to his other voices, which were already on the brink of comatose? I had to make it a point to try to understand Mark's poetry, and when I could not grasp his meaning, I made it a point to seek him out and have him explain his points to me. In order to seek him out, I often had to wake him up in class. Pleased that he was not being awakened out of obligation, or to be yelled at for sleeping, but rather because understanding him, his voice, and his poetry were important to me, once awakened, Mark tried very hard through his revisions to make his poetry clearer to his readers. I hoped that developing the power to reach others would help him end some of his feelings of isolation, and serve as a true awakening for his self image.

Another student in my class who saw himself as isolated due to his own idiosyncrasies was Adam. I distinctly remember the day I had a breakthrough with Adam. He came up to me and asked, "Am I weird?" Now, many teachers may answer this question with: "of course you are not weird". For me, a more honest approach was better because I think deep down his question was rhetorical, and unless I said, "Yes," he

would know I was just being the nice teacher. Adam had been called weird by numerous students throughout his classes. He was tall, in the band, made witty jokes to students who did not get them (the adults usually did, but that only further isolated him from his peers), he also had a dark and demented side, which showed itself in his laughing at pain, threatening death to those who antagonized him, and occasionally cursing at other students who bothered him or made snide remarks when he spoke up in a class. He often wrote about blood and death so vividly that he scared not just others, but even himself. He asked me, “Do you think I can become sick or crazy, or worse, do some of the terrible things I write about, simply because I have the capacity to write about them, meaning the desire is in me somewhere?” I just told him that he was doing the job of a writer. If Adam asked me to write a horror scene it would be so twisted it would worry him. That would not make me crazy, just a good writer.

However, his ‘am I weird’ question got a more direct answer. I simply told him that, “Yes, you are weird”. Then I asked him if he knew how many people thought I was weird, and he started laughing. I told him that neither of us was normal, but that was the beauty of being us. I just asked him to be himself and let the rest of the world waste time worrying about what category to stick him in. We talked about why he sometimes liked to play the weird role with students because they would leave him alone, which was much more peaceful, but at the same time his isolation was lonely and frustrating. He told me that he was glad I told him the truth, because he had come to expect my bluntness and honesty from my comments on his poems. He said that he knew it was going to be okay to be himself in this class, which I took to mean that I had affirmed him by calling him weird. I had accepted him, and we now shared a solidarity that would sustain us

throughout the year. It was an affirmation of self he wasn't getting socially, and one that he wasn't getting from himself. Since I had entered into a relationship with Adam, I hoped it would help him question whether or not he was only worthy of isolation. I hoped he could continue to express himself in his writing, which would help other students see who he really was, which might help him form new relationships with his peers.

My students' disempowering views of themselves as either "inadequate", "worthless", "powerless", "isolated" or "unlovable" were hard enough to deal with on an individual basis. Helping them was complicated by the fact that they came together to form a community that had a negative self image. Within this group, they had not only more confidence to articulate their negative views of self, but also the reinforcement they needed to hold on to those negative beliefs. Having so many students gathered together with disempowering views of themselves gave them comfort, because each individual realized s/he was not alone. But instead of this realization helping them see that each one of them as individuals was not what was at fault, and start looking outward for causes for the negative views of self they had adopted, my students used the realization to justify their belief that something was simply wrong with them. The final section of this chapter provides a closer look of disempowering self images in a group setting.

Group Dynamics and Disabling Self Images

One of the most telling examples of the class's negative self imagery and disempowering feelings of helplessness, fear, and a lack of agency came during our discussion of one of Adam's poems early in the school year. The following conversation that resulted from his poetry reading gives keen insight into the conviction behind their

feelings of powerlessness to change their selves or lives. It is also an example of the personal investment it took from me to dialogue with my students. This discussion also explains how they learned to cope with being powerless. Adam read this poem to the class and the class began to discuss the poem as was the custom during our poetry readings. It was great that the others were so drawn into Adam's work. Because his views built bridges to the realities of his peers, he received affirmation that he was not as weird as he thought he was. He certainly wasn't isolated, as the class listened intently and then engaged in an intense dialogue about his poem. Adam's poem became the backdrop for a discussion that seemed to touch many students. His train metaphor was the catalyst for group learning, critical thought, and questioning - in other words, our community making meaning of our world.

“The Train Station”

What is destiny?
Destiny is nothing more than
One of many, one-car trains at a station.
Each one going in their own directions
With differing amounts of stops,
All without return trips.
Which one will we take, for how long
And where we get off is all up to us.
The train can only do what it is meant to do,
Take us to the next stop.
What we do there is up to us.
The trains may sometimes take unexpected turns
Uncharted rails, unfortunately crash into another train,
Or merge with another onto one track.

But to where we ought to be,
Is the only place the trains will take us.
Though the thought of being on a train,
Alone and without knowing where you are going
Maybe scary, it is also exciting to know that at
Any point, we can simply pull the cord and get off.
Destiny may only have the job of taking us

To our destination, but we,
We are in control of that destiny,
We control it with free will,
The power of choice,
The durability to withstand any outcome of those choices,
And the mentality to learn from them.

Lack of control and agency lead to image of being powerless

I decided to begin this particular discussion by ascertaining if the other students shared Adam's view of being in control of their destiny. "Is there anyone who disagrees that we have control?" I asked. At this point, Sondra and Desi immediately started laughing, but said nothing. I continued: "If I put people in this class on that train, do you believe you have the power to pull that chord and change things?" Finally, there were four clear "NO's": Sondra, Desi, Lucy, and Jesse.

"You can't fix it, you can't change it." Desi says.

"Yes, you can, but I don't know how to change my destiny," Mark responded.

"If it is destiny, then you can't change it. Your change is just a trick. So technically, you need to agree with us because your yes was really a no," Lucy pointed out.

She continued: "You can be on a track, but break a leg, end your football career, and then discover a new talent like writing. We do have a choice to get off, but people choose to stay."

"Yes, that is where so many people in this class are, Ayo. You are on a track - you don't like it, but say you can't do anything about it. So, I will just ride this train and complain about it, and be cynical, and be miserable. You just like complaining. When are you all going to stop going along for the ride with your lives?" I asked.

I was trying to get them to think about the passive position so many of them seemed to have accepted in their present lives as well as for their futures. I saw this passivity as a potential key to challenging their belief that they were powerless. I wanted

them to see the possibility that they could, in fact, take action and begin to control their futures. I could only offer the challenge because they had the power to make changes in their belief systems and I did not. The problem was, they had no answer to my question. The concept may have been too new for them to answer me immediately. I may have needed to relax and allow them time to reflect on the possibility of no longer going along for the ride (which to me included their belief that they were not in control of their destiny, lives, and images of self because that power belonged to the adult society around them) and assuming control of their lives.

It also became clear that the students interested in assuming control did not know how one might begin this process. At one point Sondra pleaded: “Mr. Daniel, there is no other way. Destiny is a big suggestion. We don’t want to follow the suggestion, but we can’t make our own suggestions.” “Why can’t you?” I responded. I honestly wanted to know why they couldn’t make their own course. My questioning was meant both to stimulate and challenge their thinking and to inform me as to why they believed they had no agency. “They said you couldn’t,” she added in exasperation. “Who said? And even if they did, that is just one vision, one conceptualization of destiny, choice, and the future. “Why do you have to buy into it?” I asked.

It was the buy in, the belief that they themselves had no power or control that was so disabling for them in my view. They chose to accept this predestined view of the world and their powerless position in it. I just couldn’t understand why in the world they were so accepting of having no control. An answer came from Lucy, who pointed out the fact that they did not feel a sense of ownership over where their lives were going in terms

of college, career, and all other aspects of the 'good life'. They were just following along a predetermined path that adults said were the right steps for children to follow.

As the conversation continued, Lucy quickly came to Sondra's defense. She said, "There are only certain stops on the train. Someone else made it. You can't get off anywhere you want. The stops don't exist. You can't get off in the desert."

"SURE I can. I can jump!" I yelled.

My intent was to show that an individual did not have to just sit back and passively hate the ride that was taking them somewhere they did not want to be in life. I wanted them to see that the individual did have the power to make changes. Yes, it was risky to set your own path, but I thought it was a risk worth taking. But, jumping off the socially predetermined track seemed to be a risk they believed they could not afford to take. "Yeah o.k. Mr. Daniel, then you will die," Lucy responded as Sondra laughed. "I don't choose to believe that I will die. I can walk the other way. My way." Angered, Sondra said, "If the train is D.C. to L.A., you can't get to New York." "Yes, I can; I can walk back from LA. It is possible. I can use that train to get as close as I can. The system may be flawed, but I can manipulate it to my advantage," I told them.

I wanted them to see that the power to manipulate did belong to the individual as long as the individual believed that it did. I hoped they might see that things are not all set in stone and that there is hope for them to find their path in life. I used my own beliefs as a way to share with them an alternative reality as well as who I was as a person. If they could understand that I would never give up on myself, they might be able to infer that I would never give up on them, which could inspire them to never give up on themselves. I believed that I was creating an opportunity for them to escape their

disempowering mode of thinking by presenting powerful possibilities. As the conversation continues below, I tried to help them see that the power to change did reside inside of each of them.

“Yeah, but what about all that wasted time, your wasted life on the wrong train?” Sondra asked.

“It isn’t a waste. I can plan my next move for when I can get off the train. It isn’t a waste because I learned that wasn’t where I wanted to go.”

“But Mr. Daniel, we just are accustomed to waiting on the next train. Society is set. Society says it can be better tomorrow so we just wait, we don’t do anything. That makes today not suck so much in our mind,” Lucy carefully explained to me.

“But how do you avoid depression with that philosophy?” I asked, because if they really saw themselves as helpless and at the whim of society, then how could they avoid the depression that comes from the realization that you have no power or control? Their powerless self image had them sitting back and waiting for things to magically change.

“Severe denial,” Sondra offered.

“Yeah, we just go back to sleep,” Desi added to second Sondra’s theory as she looked over at Mark who had his head down again.

“But that is so disempowering. Where is the power in that position? Why accept a role with no agency, no power, and no control over your life?” I asked.

Desi joked, “I’ll just write happy poems from here on out.”

At this point in the discussion, the class giggled, but I decided to push them even further. This was the type of conversation that they needed to engage in. I could not let them joke their way out of such an important conversation about their relationship to society. My students were telling me that change was beyond their reach, which was a disempowering notion. I knew that if I let them “win” this debate, that I would affirm their disempowering stance. I had to come up with something that would get them to question their own way of seeing the world. If they could begin to doubt that they had no

power, they could begin to believe that they did have the capability of changing society rather than being a social pawn. What I had not anticipated was the fear that my students associated with trying to make change and acquire happiness for themselves.

Paralyzed by fear, my students accept misery to gain power

Later in the discussion of Adam's poem, I found a way that I thought might help them see that they had a choice in how their lives would play out. Since they seemed so convinced that the path they were on was leading them to a miserable existence, I asked them, "Why do you all choose misery?" I asked as a leading question to test my understanding of their views articulated earlier in the conversation. I often asked them questions in order to ground my own thinking rather than act on my assumptions.

"The other choice is choose to be happy about being on a train going somewhere you don't want to be." Sondra answered.

"No, there is a third choice. Get off!"

"Yeah, jump out the window," Ayo added in my defense.

"Yes, you can. Do whatever it takes. Do anything," I pleaded with them.

"It is hard. It is scary," Desi said, to which Sondra added an "exactly".

"Right. That may be the issue. You are afraid. You fear the effort and the potential negative consequences of change." I said.

"Yeah." Lucy confirmed.

"But you can't let that fear control you, and just keep complaining." I told them.

"Can't we just take baby steps?" Lucy asked.

"Where have those baby steps gotten you in the last 16, 17 years besides to more misery, more cynicism and depression?" I asked in return.

"Who wants to take big giant steps? You are going to fall. Little bitty steps are safer and better," Marlon chimed in, which was no surprise considering all the times he had failed, leading him to feel worthless.

"Big steps, you fall on your face. At least with the little steps you can catch yourself before a big fall." Ayo added.

“You all are such cowards,” I goaded, but a surprising mass “Yeah” came from their voices, echoed by Sondra’s declaration, “Yes, I am a coward.”

“We will fail,” Marlon insisted.

“So what! Then you take another giant step in a different direction,” I said.

“No, there is no try and try, try again,” Lucy insisted.

“If you are up in Vegas, you can’t take a giant step and lose everything,” Ayo added, which seemingly sent his support back to the class.

“Well, actually, you will never get up big in Vegas taking little baby steps. The odds aren’t in your favor. You would have to bet big and gamble at some point. You can’t nickel and dime your way to greatness,” I said to challenge him. I wanted them to begin thinking more about success and greatness and less about mere survival and coping. It was at this point that they explained why there was no need to take risks or try to be completely happy. They believed that they had found a way to be happy already. They just made the choice to accept their plight and make the best of a bad situation. As the conversation continued, Desi said:

“Things are bad, but what if we are comfortable there. We found a way to be comfortable with what we know.” To which Ayo added,

“Misery can turn into happiness.”

“Yeah, you find a way to cope with it and you can be happy.” Sondra smiled.

“Wow, that is wonderful. You know things are bad, you aren’t happy. You won’t change and/or fear change. So you have found a way to be above it all. You sit back and say, ‘See, I am better than everyone else. I see that there is no way out, no change, and that everything will turn out the same and that nothing matters. I am smart and better because I have sense not to try. I am better and cynical because I see the impending doom of everyone else’s efforts to change’,” I spewed sarcastically. Again, I was surprised by their response.

“Precisely,” Sondra said, as if I had finally gotten it. Desi nodded in agreement.

“You all are so mistaken. That is what is fake. That is a faked happiness because you are afraid to pursue real happiness. The trick is, you just believe it isn’t possible or within your power, so you can be happy being miserable. You have sadly fooled yourselves into believing that the miserable path society has dictated for you is unavoidable, so you might as well embrace the madness.”

I argued because the hopelessness, despair, misery, and powerlessness my students expressed were their realities. I knew this conversation was only a beginning to help them believe in their own power to change their reality, but without me pushing them, would they have ever begun to question the position of powerlessness they had become so comfortable with? It was scary to see that my students had found a way to make being powerless a position of power. They just accepted their fate, got comfortable with the fact that they couldn’t change anything, and counted themselves blessed for knowing better than to try any more in life. To hear eighteen-year-olds so ready to give up and believe that they were weak, inadequate, and powerless was not something I was ready to accept. They really wanted to know if there was a different way, a way to change, a reason to have hope, and I was going to do my best to give them that hope. I believe this conversation helped them realize that deep down they truly were not happy with the way they saw themselves, with their choices, and that just calling themselves happy was not the answer. The concept of happiness might be something tangible and worth pursuing if they could conceive of it first. Maybe then they could begin to confront their fears and take steps, big or small, towards what they really wanted to do, be, feel, and experience in life.

Offering my version of hope to the powerless

The discussion concluded with me using my own experiences as an attempt to instill a sense of hope in my students. I decided to share these experiences with them because they had been sharing themselves with me, and because I believed that I too had beliefs about power that needed to be looked at critically.

“I am worried about your real lives. You are not taking action in your real lives,” I told them.

“What do you want us to do? School is a blower; we can’t get off the train,” Ayo said.

“We can’t get far on a GED,” Lucy added.

“But his poem has a great metaphor because it gives us a chance to change, if we are not afraid,” Susan countered.

“So the question is, how do you overcome the fear and make these other choices?”

“Mr. D., we just got to suck it up,” Ayo answered.

“Everything has consequences, so just do what you want since you will have to pay either way. We know the consequences of the set way because we suffer through them every day. Why not try things our way?” Susan continued.

“But no matter what, you end up in a place that is the same as everywhere else,” Sondra told her.

“More fatalist, nothing matters hoopla.” I said, trying to move them past the negative and let the positive energy continue.

“How do you stay so optimistic?” she asked me.

“I believe I have power because I just do and say the things I want to. I experiment with the world. I play with the people and rules in it to test my own theories and to understand. Yes, I make mistakes (I laughed). I move on. I may make other mistakes, but I might not the next time, so I keep doing the things I want to do. Do people get angry? Not like me? Yeah, sometimes, but that is their problem. I still keep doing the things I want to do. I still take big steps and try to

change the things I don't like about myself, and my society. I am afraid too, sometimes, but I know doing nothing will depress me, so I push forward and continue to battle.”

I hoped that using myself as an example would not only contradict their hopeless views, but also help me become more real and more human to them. Admitting my fears and my own struggles with issues of agency was my attempt to show them I was just a fellow human struggling to shape the world around me in such a fashion as to allow me to be comfortable being my self in that world. I was not trying to be a role model in the traditional sense, but I was modeling hope and possibility, which I hoped could spark my students' critical thinking about self. I also realized that my identity as a teacher and my identity as an individual had to merge and become transparent to my students if I was going to build relationships with them. I realized that my students had to come to know me just as I had to come to know them. So much emphasis is placed on coming to know the students, but too little emphasis has been placed on teachers opening up and offering themselves to their students so that there can be a mutual relationship and both teacher and student can learn.

“Even if you repeatedly fail, you are still going to want to go out and try stuff?”

Desi asked.

“Yes!” I responded.

“Why?” She continued.

“Because, I might succeed the next time. I can also laugh at the mistake. I really thought I could do it, I can't believe I failed, I tell myself. I chuckle and either try the same thing again out of sheer spite and determination or I try something else,” I told her.

“At what point do you quit?” Marlon asked.

“Never, that is what life has to be about. Otherwise, you are not living,” I said.

I wanted them to see that giving up or giving in, as I understood them to be doing, was the equivalent of being dead. They were not living life. To me, life was about individuals growing and making choices despite their fears, and I wanted my students to experience this quality of life as an alternative to the fearful, powerless existence they had been articulated to me during the discussion of this poem.

“What if you’re bad at everything?” Ayo questioned.

“I don’t quit ever. I just try other things.” I responded.

“Right now we just go along with the system until we feel comfortable. Feel like we have enough power to do something else. Take baby steps. It is easier to give up since we are powerless,” Lucy said.

“But how long are you going to continue to try that? You aren’t happy. You have the power right now to change. You just have to believe it and try something else,” I told her, trying to get them to see that they did in fact have power even if they could not see it or draw from it yet.

“Our parents control us.” Desi said. “They have the power.”

“But what about when you leave the house??? They have no clue what you are doing,” I said. They laughed in agreement.

“But parents control the money. We can’t go against them,” Jasmine said.

“Well, you can, but you are going to have to earn your own money,” I told them.

“You make it sound so easy.” Mark said.

“I don’t mean to. I know it isn’t easy to do these things. It is scary, but you have to go through these hurdles if you really want to do something. People in power know that you won’t really do anything if there are obstacles in the way. That is how they control young people and anyone in general who wants a piece of their power.”

By using the ‘hurdle’ metaphor in the above quote, I wanted them to see that the things in their way could be tangible things, which would lead to visualization of their issues, and potentially to change.

“I agree. My parents hate the plays and everything I do that isn’t math or science. To be in the play, I had to pay someone to drive me until I got my license, then I had to get a job to pay for insurance once I got a license because they refused. But, I wanted it bad enough so I went through all of their crap,” Desi supported. “Society and those in power just toss hurdles: write an essay, get recommendations. They try to make you quit so that they are not the bad guy. Instead, you are the one who gave up,” I told them.

“You are too optimistic. You view life as a game,” Sondra told me. “Those in power want to keep it. It is a game to them. I just want you to see their game and begin to beat them at it,.” I told her. “We can’t do anything ‘til we’re 18,” Lucy said. “Age is just another hurdle. Make your plans for when you turn 18. Don’t forget about your dreams while you wait,” I told her. “Who makes these hurdles?” Lucy asked. “That is a great question. You all have to begin to investigate that, so you can see where the power in society lies. For example, this school throws hurdles at you. But you all aren’t willing to jump over them,” I answered as the bell rang.

Their intensity during this discussion was typical of the thought and insight they brought to the majority of our class discussions. My comments during this discussion, which challenged both their notions of being powerless and their ideas of what might be possible, reflect techniques that I employed throughout the course.

I really hoped that my refusal to budge made an impression on them. I believed that as adamant as they were about things being hopeless, helpless and powerless, it would be close to impossible for a teacher who was neutral, indifferent, or who didn’t have the passion to show them another possibility, to move them in their thinking. If I

had given in to them, I am pretty confident that they would have continued to feel disempowered and allowed their fears to control them, because then even the teacher could not have proven them wrong. I believe that giving them an alternative view of the world and their place and power in it allowed them the opportunity to examine their own beliefs and question their position in society, which is a major component of critical literacy. Not settling for just discussing the likes, dislikes, and literary merits of the poem (though those things are essential to the writing process), led these students to think about whether or not they could actually do the things they wanted to do in life, and whether or not the powerless view they had of themselves was accurate. Now that my students had articulated specific views about their self images, critical literacy theory had been given meaning in my class. Examining self in this class would be about examining these negative self images, redefining the self, generating more positive self images, as well as understanding the social forces that hindered and might continue to stand as obstacles to their newly emerging self images.

My role wasn't to give them answers as we began this journey of self exploration through poetry; it was to give them hope by providing them with an alternate view of the world and of themselves. After that discussion, I realized the increased burden on my shoulders as a critical literacy teacher in this particular poetry classroom, given these students' particular issues. I knew I was going to have to be sensitive and in tune to their vulnerability and pain, and aware of the fact that ordinary teacher mistakes on my part would have major consequences not just on their writing, but on their lives. In other words, coming to know my students and their particular issues gave me a moral responsibility to help them and alter the curriculum of the course to ensure each student

could grow in the ways they needed to. The stakes had been raised for me as a result of this conversation because just as they had exposed part of themselves to me, I had become even more invested in them. Their views were so disempowering, that as their teacher, I felt I would become literally depressed if unable to contribute to their growth in thinking about themselves. I think that pressure forced me to be more thoughtful thereafter in my comments on their poetry and my comments in class discussions. Though I was clearly a part of their community, I realized the role I would play would not always be the solidarity part that I had envisioned as central from my understanding of Freire's work. I had to oppose them in order to promote critical thinking and critical understanding when their views of themselves were so disturbing. I had to walk the fine line between being with them and having enough distance from them to see them in a different light, so that I could help them see themselves differently, come to love themselves, to accept that they did have agency, and to help them overcome their fears of taking action in their lives and our world. However, as I had told them, the fear I had about letting them down did not paralyze me; instead, it motivated me to be a more thoughtful teacher -and hopefully that meant being a better teacher- and also motivated me to make different and more humanizing pedagogical choices to help them as my students. The various dimensions and implementation of a humanizing pedagogy I developed in this classroom will be the focus of the next chapters.

CHAPTER V

Dialogue and Love as Dimensions of Humanizing Pedagogy

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the pedagogical choices I made in order to help address my students' problems with self love, manifest from their negative self images revealed in the previous chapter. This chapter explains the first two aspects of a humanizing pedagogy: the expression of love and the dialogic use of letter writing. This chapter argues that love and dialogue become part of humanizing pedagogy when they are lived by teachers and teachers are moved to action by their love for students and the dialogue between teacher and student. After discussing the rationale for, and specifics of each dimension of pedagogy, the chapter focuses on the substance of dialogic letters. In these letters, I wrote to my students about the course, their poetry, the significance of loving themselves and the expression of my love for them. The analysis of one particular letter written to the entire class includes my intentions in writing the letter, my analysis looking back at the letter, as well as students' reactions to the letter. Finally, I will examine how the dialogic letter became a catalyst for both student and teacher change.

Rethinking my Construct of Dialogue

At the beginning of this study, I saw dialogue as a "*pedagogical strategy, supporting the type of teaching I am striving toward where students feel safe to speak, have equal opportunity to do so, and where each voice is valued equally.*" I quickly realized however, based on my students' disempowering self images and other particular dilemmas, that I was going to have to rethink my construct of dialogue in the context of

my poetry classroom and my students' lives. This section explains the issues and factors that influenced the changes in my thinking about dialogue.

As the class evolved, my relationships with my students and their relationships with each other grew close enough so that the opportunity to speak in a safe environment was no longer the major hurdle. On the one hand, I was achieving one of my goals when it came to student dialogue in the classroom: my students were speaking their minds, voicing their opinions, dialoging with each other, and transposing their feelings into poetic forms. However, considering and debating what should happen *to* their discourse once it was voiced soon loomed as a more pressing challenge. I realized that dialogue was no longer just about getting students to speak; the concentration and learning that needed to take place was centered around what they were saying and what they were writing. I needed to focus more closely what I could do as teacher to help them now that they had engaged in dialogue. I could not have my students expressing their innermost thoughts, feelings, and views about self, then ignore or silence them by failing to give them the attention these revelations deserved. If their voices fell on deaf ears, they would have no incentive to continue to express themselves. I could not let them think that their voices did not matter in my classroom. I believed that the proper way to validate their voices was to continue the dialogue my students had begun in their discussion and poems.

As I described earlier, I had a class full of students who, according to their images of self, did not feel valuable. I needed to find a form of dialogue that could value and validate each of their individual voices and through which I could form relationships with each student; I needed a form of dialogue that would allow me to learn enough about who

my students believed they were, that would allow me access to their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, and that also would allow me to share myself with them and to feel valuable as a teacher, helper, and thinker. I also needed this form to be safe enough for all of these variables to take place. Given this assessment, I experimented with a form of dialogue that I believed would meet all of my concerns about an effective means of dialogue through which my students and I could engage each other. The dialogic letter became the vehicle for me to accomplish these goals.

Defining the Dialogic Letter

The dialogic letter became a major form of dialogue in my classroom. In this section, I define the dialogic letter and then discuss the benefits of this form of dialogue for my students and for myself. Next, I discuss the origins of the letter, emanating from two of my teaching methods already in place in the class: the teacher comment section at the bottom of my students' poetry and the beginning of the year letter to the teacher. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this form of dialogue.

In my classroom, the primary functions of the dialogic letter were to promote critical thinking on the part of the recipient and to invite and initiate further dialogue between teacher and student. The dialogic letter addressed issues raised in class from the teacher's own personal perspective. However, because I wanted to generate reciprocity and dialogue, I left space for students to confirm or challenge my understandings about them, the class, or concepts. The dialogic letter was a place for me to ask questions of my students in order to better understand their thoughts and ideas. I used the letters to ask them to think about themselves, things they wrote about themselves, their self

images, and anything that seemed problematic or an obstacle to their growth and development as writers and as human beings. The letters were written with clear intentions, but the student responses were not scripted. The students were free to respond however they wished. The dual benefit of this approach was that I could push them in their thinking about their images of self while they had the space to think about self in a freer and less formal form than a class, class discussion, or even a poem.

Furthermore, the dialogic letter was an invitation to students to continue to discuss issues with their teacher. The dialogic letters were engaging, which caused students to want to write back to me. They were not required to write back to me, nor do I believe I could force them to share or think with me. I did not want to force them into another artificial teacher student exchange such as they had experienced in so many other classes throughout their traditional high school experience. I wanted them to write to me of their own free will; it was not required that they respond, and there were no grading repercussions if a student chose not to respond. There were only three instances, during the entire year, where a student did not write back. The benefits of an open approach were that I could gauge personal relationships by who wrote back and by what they said, I could learn even more about my students because all information received was freely offered, and they were given an opportunity to respond to a teacher without force or obligation within the school context, which presented a novel feeling for many of them.

The dialogic letter is also defined by the personal letter genre. Like a personal letter, I could use this space to share my personal thoughts, opinions, and parts of myself I felt I could entrust to the student who received my letter. The premise of the personal letter is that it is safe because one is writing to someone whom one trusts. By initiating

the personal letter, I could send the message of trust to my students and hope they felt the same way about me, which might allow them to write personal letters back to me. A benefit of the personal letter was that, due to its intrinsic, intimate nature, it gave me the opportunity to express my love and concern for my students and allowed me to build stronger relationships with them as we wrote back and forth to each other.

I expressed my love for them in the letters by letting them know that someone in this world respected, cared for, loved, and thought the world of them regardless of what anyone else thought or what they happened to think about themselves. I did not waiver in my compassion and level of caring for each student. In fact, I believe that with each poem, each letter, each conversation with each student, I became more invested in who they were as people. I can honestly say that what helped me to show them love was the fact that I actually liked them as people. They were funny, smart, talented, interesting, quirky, and yes troubled. I only say this because giving love was not a notion, it was a *way of being* in the classroom; it extended beyond the realm of logos into the world of praxis. I did not want to keep my love for them a secret because it did not need to be. I believed they needed to hear that they were loved just as they were and I hoped my love for them would affirm who they were and help them challenge the negative images they had of themselves. When I decided to express my love to my students, this love became a dimension of a humanizing pedagogy. The expression of love humanized my relationship with my students and helped me develop a humanizing pedagogy because it is not just about a “feeling” but an expression of that feeling. When dealing with students who have not been given enough love and face alienation issues, my expressions of love in the letters were a critical piece of a foundation needed to begin to teach my students.

Thus, not being distant and neutral in the lives of my students became part of my professional responsibility.

The dialogic letter was not an artificial notion. Born from methods and relationships already in place in the classroom, the dialogic letter presented a transformation and extension of what I thought was the best of my practice, so it could be used most effectively for my students. First, the letters were an extension of the type of writing I was already doing in the teacher comment space at the bottom of their poems. That white space at the bottom of the poem page is where so much of my teaching took place in this class, but the space was not literally or figuratively big enough for all that I needed to say to each student. That white space is where I commented on the poem's artistic merit or lack thereof. I also used that space to point out troubling images, metaphors, or any other language that hinted at negative expressions of self. The main limitation of that white space was that if I were to write too much at the bottom of their poem, it might seem that their poem and their voice were being overshadowed by my voice. As I did want to respect their poem and their art, I had to balance doing justice to their poem in that space, while pushing them in their thinking about self whenever the opportunity arose. Even though I was trying through my comments to change the traditional practice of the teacher comment section on student work from a formal, sterile, 'here is what you did wrong and how it needs to be fixed' formula, I knew that because of my students' prior experiences with teacher comments in English classes, it would be hard to reach them using only that space. I needed a less formal place to continue my teaching. That space became available when I began to use the dialogic letter. I benefited from this platform because it gave me space for both the personal and the

critical reflection, and I could reference poems when need be without having to worry about taking over their voice within the context of their poetry because the letter was mine.

The second piece of my practice that transformed through the dialogic letter was the traditional letter to the teacher at the beginning of a course that many teachers in the school used to get to know student likes, dislikes, interests, and hobbies, or to assess prior knowledge and what students wanted to or expected to learn in the course. There is value in this use for student letters, but the limitation is that due to the sheer numbers and time constraints, teachers are not able to do much with the letters. While I do believe teachers who ask for these letters (or sometimes note cards) do read or skim them all, my experiences have shown me that students do not believe this to be the case. My students essentially sighed when I asked them to write the traditional letter to the teacher on the second day of school. They asked me if teachers really read them, if I was going to really read them, and if I knew that this was the third or fourth “bull crap get to know you farce” they had participated in that week. While they were not surprised by my request to write a letter, what they did not expect was for me to actually go home and write letters back to each one of them individually. The act of responding to students let them know that both they and their voices would be valued by their teacher. However, I understand why most teachers do not write back to every student in the way I did. It took me several hours to write the fifteen one page responses, which was an enormous amount of time, given all of my responsibilities. But the choice to use that time in such a productive way proved fruitful to both students and myself. I do wonder how I could have possibly written letters to all five of my English classes, which contained close to one hundred and

forty students. It is possible, but I would have to stagger the letter writing in order to allow myself time to respond. By the end of the year, the class had written me close to one hundred pages of their letters, and I had written three sets of individual letters totaling seventy five pages. The consuming nature of the dialogic letter was a challenge, but I feel the letters were well worth the time because of how close they brought me to my students and because of the tremendous growth they experienced through the letters.

After providing a clearer picture of what the dialogic letter is (a personal letter meant to allow the teacher to promote critical reflection, questioning of beliefs, stronger relationships, love, and further dialogue, below I provide examples of my earliest attempts at writing dialogic letters to illustrate and clarify the evolution and role of the dialogic letter in my classroom.

Early examples of the Dialogic Letter

This section presents a summary of my students' initial letters, an assignment on the second day of school. My students expressed to me the way they used poetry in their lives and what they wanted to gain from the course. I grouped their responses into four categories based on their perspectives of the function of poetry: as an outlet for emotions, as an outlet for negativity, as therapy, and as a chore. In each category, I provide excerpts from students' letters and then provide an excerpt from the type of letter I wrote back to students in that group. While each student in the aforementioned groups received letters that were differentiated and specific to them, some parts of my response to them were similar due to their similar understandings about poetry. This section provides a

discussion where students' insights into the necessity of poetry in their lives and how they planned to use poetry to express who they were and what they felt are revealed. It is also important to note that without any apparent coercion on my part, my students wanted to use poetry as their vehicle to express themselves. The dialogic letters I wrote to them were both invitations to use the course as the students saw fit as well as invitations into the exploration of self.

The first group of students saw poetry as a way to express their emotions, as shown in the following four excerpts from their letters.

“Poetry is a way to express my self. I can put more on paper than I could ever say with words.” Jesse was an African American male struggling to remain eligible in school for sports and who saw himself as worthless.

“Poetry is a great way to reach out to people or express something that you may not be able to express otherwise. “ Mary was a white female honor roll student who saw herself as powerless.

“I write about my emotions, my innermost thoughts, and what is going on around me.” Amy was an Asian American female who was shy, didn't like people to hear her poetry, and saw herself as powerless as well.

“I write poetry often, it is the easiest way to express my feelings.” Mark was a young Caucasian man with dreams of becoming a writer, but saw himself as isolated and misunderstood.

“Poetry we had to write was written with structured rules demeaning the purpose of poetry itself. Poetry is random, it comes to you when an event or idea so strongly affects your life you just have to sit and write about it to make yourself heard. The opposite isn't poetry anymore, it is just an assignment,” wrote Desi.

My responses to the expression of this ‘emotion group’ were geared at encouraging them to continue writing about their emotions and to invite them to share with the class. My goal in the letters was to invite them to dialogue with me through their poetry and help them understand that this class could be a safe and nurturing outlet for their emotions. Here is an example of a dialogic letter extending this invitation:

“Mary, you wrote about using poetry to express your feelings. Well, all I ask of you is to have the courage to express your feelings on the page and to allow your classmates and myself to read, respond, relate, and enjoy them. What type of things have you been thinking or feeling lately? What are the things that have been on your mind to write about, but you haven’t written about yet? Start writing about those things today because I do want to hear about what is on your mind and in your heart. I hope that you can trust us enough to share your emotions with us.”

In each dialogic letter to a member of this group, I was trying to reassure the student that it was acceptable to write about their emotions. A significant point to note is that I was not forcing them to write about self, I was encouraging them to write about a topic of their choosing. My overt encouragement was necessary because I needed students to write about self to help me understand them, and help them with their struggles to understand and redefine their destructive and dangerous images of self. Trusting a group of strangers with one’s emotions is difficult, so I wanted them to see that it took courage to share themselves with us. I used the word “hope” because I knew I was asking a lot from them and didn’t want to seem imposing or too invasive. This group of students began to write about their emotions. Later in this chapter, I analyze their writing.

The second group of letters I identified consisted of students who saw poetry as an outlet for negative feelings. The following three excerpts from this group's letters are in some ways similar to the emotions group, but they specifically focused on using poetry to cope with stress, hardships, and frustrations in their lives.

"Poetry is my relief when there is a lot of stress in my life." Jessie also articulated, which placed him in this group as well.

"Poetry helps me deal with the hardships in my life. When I'm in a bad mood and don't feel like being bothered with the rest of the world, I lock myself in my room and write poetry for hours. It calms me down and takes away my anger." Ayo was an African-American male with an imposing physical appearance coupled with a deep full speaking voice, yet who still saw himself as inadequate.

"I write poetry to get feelings and frustrations out." Susan was a white female worried about her future happiness and saw herself as inadequate and unlovable.

My dialogic letters to the negative feelings group again encouraged and invited them to write more about the negative feelings that plagued their lives. If poetry was an outlet for them, then they had to understand that this upcoming year could be an outlet for them as well. I was very interested in the types of things that are causing these students so much stress, anger, and frustration. Hopefully, by encouraging them to write about these topics, their frustrations about the world and the people in it, their writing might begin to be a vehicle for the type of critical insight we would be looking for during the semester. If students could name their own oppressive forces, it might prove a form of unveiling oppression that Freire discussed in Pedagogy of the Oppressed¹¹². For those students, my responses were quite similar to the emotions group.

¹¹² Freire 1989

“Ayo, I hope you can use this class to relieve the numerous stresses in your life. As we begin the unit, what are the most pressing issues or things that are causing you the most stress right now? Try making a list of those things and write poems about each one. You may find that the things stressing you are also stressing many of your classmates as well. Whenever there are things weighing on your mind, use this class as your space to get those things off your mind. I also want you to write about the anger you say poetry takes away. I know you write and don’t feel angry any more, but writing about those things that angered you may help you put them in perspective. Please feel free to use this class to express your frustrations.”

Again, I extended them an invitation to use the class and their poetry to create an opportunity for dialogue with their peers as well as myself. I wanted them to see that they might not need to feel isolated by their anger and frustrations if other people in the class could relate to their poems. I hoped that these students could build bridges to each other’s experiences and form a solidarity that could help each of them re-examine their self image.

The third group of students was the group who saw poetry as a vehicle for therapy, evidenced by the following three excerpts from their letters.

“Poetry is therapy. When I feel depressed or angry, I feel better after taking it out on a piece of paper.” Hank was a musician concerned with the oppression in South America and a member of the Students for Social Change group in the school, yet felt powerless due to the few actual changes he was able to influence.

“When feeling down, stressed out, troubled, I express myself in poetry. Whenever I’m not feeling up to par or something is bothering me, I write what I am going through and feel 10 times better. My creativity comes through pain,” Jasmine wrote because she only saw poetry as her place to heal, which is why she referred to poetry as her medicine in the previous chapter.

“I write poetry often for its therapeutic aspect. Besides expressing myself in poetry, my goal is to find something in me worth expressing, something meaningful. I would like to learn about who I am, what I believe, and if possible, through refining my poetry, I would like to refine myself. I don’t want to be

ordinary.” Sondra voiced because she saw poetry and her drawings as her way to express who she is and who she wants to become.

In comparison to the other groups, my response to this group were the longest by far. They often took up an entire page single spaced. I wrote more to these students because their letters and issues seemed to demand more from me. These letters seemed like cries for help from struggling humans. I really did not want to start the poetry unit off by not responding well enough to these students and somehow inhibit the healing and therapy that they had used poetry for in the past. I had to encourage them and show that I understood their issues, so I wouldn’t lose any of them. In the previous chapter about their negative self images, I already included my dialogic letters responding to Jasmine and Sondra in which I expressed my love to them, so here I will focus on Hank’s letter.

“Hank, I’m glad you feel you need poetry. I hope you do allow poetry to continue to be your therapist and a vehicle to express yourself. I hope you feel comfortable enough with us to share those types of poems. We do want to hear about the social happenings of your life, and the things that anger and depress you. What are the things that have been getting to you lately? What are the topics that are bothering you so much right now that you need to take it out on a piece of paper? Please let this class motivate you to take out your frustrations on as many pieces of paper as you can (don’t worry our school has plenty of paper, and this time you can even use some of it to make your political statements without the threat of expulsion). I know you have a strong social conscience; I would like to see you use this class as a vehicle to express your ideas. Let your poetry draw us into the conversations you believe we ought to be having about our society.”

As I look back at this letter, I realize that if I didn’t care so much about these issues myself, I would never have pushed students so hard toward achieving something as large and potentially unattainable as healing and therapy. I wanted Hank to see that his voice did matter and that he did have another opportunity to engage me as well as his classmates in social analysis. He had the power to affect us because he could use this

class as his stage. I also wanted him to know I was going to listen to him because I wanted to, not because I had to, so I made the joke about not getting suspended for anything he had to say. I wanted him to know that I was willing to listen and protect his voice. The use of questions was a mainstay in my dialogic letters because they were promoting the idea that our communication was not over. It wasn't that I just wanted answers, I needed answers from Hank and the rest of my students; I needed to understand the issues they were facing so I could better understand them and hopefully push them to better understand themselves.

The final purpose for poetry group was made up of students who did not like reading and writing poetry. They saw poetry as just difficult to write and even more difficult to share. They were not very enthusiastic about the idea of spending the next two months writing poetry. The excerpts from their letters express these concerns quite clearly.

"I DO NOT like reading poetry out loud. Sometimes it is personal and you don't want everyone to know about it." Susan wrote.

"I have a problem with sharing my work with anyone. I know that isn't reasonable, but I am shy," Amy offered.

"I do not like poetry. It makes me dyslectic." Lucy struggled with getting to class and school on time, as well as staying awake when she did make it on time.

"Poetry and I are not friends. My thoughts aren't organized enough to be in nice neat lines." Laura was a white female who worked best when inspired and procrastinated when the work didn't interest her, which was most of the time in school.

"I can't find anything to write about." Peggy, a white female who was on several publication staffs in the school, saw herself as inadequate.

My responses to the poetry-as-troublesome group were twofold. I told them I did want them to share, and that, of course, they did not have to share any poem that they really did not want to share. I wanted them to know that I was not going to force them to read their most intimate poems, but I did value the sharing of poetry between students. I thought this concession on my part would provide them with the confidence to write the poems they needed to write without fear of an overbearing teacher forcing them to share, thus forcing them to restrict their writing and keep secrets from that teacher. I also gave them a brief Audre Lorde pep talk. In my response, I highlighted Lorde's views about why poetry needed to be shared.

“Susan, the reason I want you to share is because a great feminist named Audre Lorde argued that for women and minorities, poetry is not a luxury, and the poet could ill afford to be silent. What she meant was that often times, women and minorities have been tricked into remaining silent about their thoughts and feelings. That silence leads to isolation, because these persons believe they are the only one experiencing those feelings, which leads to frustration, depression, and further isolation. She implores women and minorities to share their thoughts and feelings through poetry, because she believes those poems build bridges to other people. The poet, who has the courage to share, may give others the power to speak and connect to them by saying, ‘hey that happened to me, too’. Once the sharing occurs, dialogue begins, and women and minorities may be able to begin to solve their common problems. In class, I will encourage you all to write back to the poems and poet that speak to you to begin the dialogue.”

I used the dialogic letter to explain to these students my rationale and personal beliefs as their teacher. I believed that being direct with them about my motives and intentions would remove me from the arbitrary ‘you have to share teacher’ they encountered in other classes and help them understand me as a person. I felt that the theory might give them a way to see sharing in another light and help them explore their stance on sharing with their peers. In other words, I hoped it would move them from a position I saw as one of fear and weakness, to what I saw as a more empowering position of duty and strength. My responses to this group were geared towards bringing them into

the conversation about self that their classmates seemed intent on having. I believed that exposing them to their classmates' writing-about-self ideas might give them something to write about they could enjoy. I also hoped that they would no longer feel isolated as non-poets if they were writing similar things to their peers. Joining in might help them embrace a sense of community and allow them to enjoy poetry for the first time.

In summary, their letters provided me with an opportunity to learn what they wanted the course and poetry to be about in our class. They had expressed their voices and I had heard them, but in order to value and validate their voices I had to act as their teacher. This illustrates the point I made at the beginning of the chapter: It is one thing to just provide opportunities for expression, but it is much more important to respond to students once they have articulated their ideas. I believe my responses were appropriate for my students because I not only let them know I heard them in my dialogic letters to them, but I opened the door for the dialogue they said they needed to continue throughout the poetry writing unit. If poetry was about expressing emotions, negativity, or therapy then so be it, but the key was for my students to know that expressing emotions was "acceptable", thus valued in this classroom, which I hoped provided them the incentive to take advantage of the opportunity to share who they were with me and their peers.

Again, neither the sharing alone nor the chance to express themselves was enough. The dialogue began with them expressing a need, the dialogue was entered into when I let them know the space was available to write about self, the dialogue was extended by my invitation to write poems about themselves, and the dialogue was continued once they wrote their poems. Then the burden shifted back to me as the teacher. I asked myself: what am I going to do with their expressions of self? What am I going to say to them?

How am I going to teach them about their poetry and self simultaneously, and how am I going to engage them in further dialogue? The answer to those questions are explored in the next section as I look at my use of the dialogic letter to address issues raised by my students and their poetry related to loving themselves.

Dialogue and love as pedagogy

In their very first letter, it was hard for me to accomplish all of the things I believed I could do in a dialogic letter. At this stage of the year, I simply did not yet know them well enough to address them as informally as I would have liked. They did not yet know me well enough to understand who I was and why I was asking them the kinds of questions about themselves that I really wanted to ask. I had not yet established the credibility I needed with them to become a guide in their pursuit of personal growth and self-acceptance because it was so early in the year. The first letters were an important step in this process because they knew that I at least cared and respected them enough to respond to the issues raised in their letters. They had gathered little glimpses into who I was as a teacher and I hoped that our future dialogue over their poetry would be the next step in this process. It is important to remember that the dialogic letter is not a single, independent event like a traditional letter; instead the dialogic letter is part of an ongoing process meant to foster growth and understanding in relationships.

An important step in our dialogue came a few months later in the semester. My students were turning in three poems a week. Commenting on each poem, I noticed a pattern emerging from their poetry. My students seemed to be expressing to me that they did not love themselves. It would happen with a subtle remark in a poem here and then a simile in a poem there. Each time this happened, I questioned them in my comments, but

did not do much more than that because I thought they were isolated incidents. However, as more and more poems came in, the pattern became clearer. Then three incidents in particular pushed me into action. The action was a dialogic letter written to the entire class. The three key incidents I will briefly explain were Susan's happiness poem, Jasmine's reading of her poem during one of our class' poetry readings, and my students' letters to me about why they did not love themselves. Then I will present my dialogic letter to the class, explain why I wrote it, and how my students responded to it.

Why Does Self Love Matter in My Classroom?

Self love is defined as healthy narcissism, which is different from narcissism. Hooks¹¹³ distinguishes between healthy narcissism, which is the ability to accept and the self, develop a sense of self worth and the power to love the self, and unhealthy narcissism, which she defines as the view that only the self matters. Based on the letters they wrote, I believed that many of my students were afraid to love themselves because they only knew about the unhealthy narcissism and did not want to be like some of their peers in school who were so arrogant and self absorbed. I wanted my students to learn and develop Hook's healthy narcissism, which I refer to as self love in this chapter. Parker¹¹⁴ argues that the work required to know the self is neither narcissistic nor selfish. I support his view that this is simply necessary work for all humans. This is also the necessary work I attempted to engage my students in during the class.

I believe that loving yourself takes precedence over all other forms of love. Loving yourself is essential to each human being's stability. Without self love, romantic, platonic, and spiritual love are threatened due to the insecurities of the individual. I also

¹¹³ Hooks 2000

¹¹⁴ Parker 1998

believe that given the various social forces like peer pressure, peer teasing, alcohol and drug enticements, sexual invitations, suicidal impulses, parental pressure, conformity pressure, and the pressure to form an acceptable social identity, my students were at risk if they did not love themselves. Hooks¹¹⁵ argues that people who see themselves as unlovable have been socialized to seem unlovable by forces outside of their control. I think it is the love of self that can provide the inner strength to resist and manage these various outside forces in one's life. Hooks also argue that reflection is a valuable tool for people to choose to stop listening to negative voices within and outside the self that constantly reject and devalue them.¹¹⁶ My dialogic letters and comments on student poetry were meant to provide students with a catalyst for self reflection.

My students needed the inner strength to reflect and to resist in particular because they had not seemed to be able to resist internalizing negative and disempowering self images. One result of my students' negative self images was that they learned that they should not and had no reason to love themselves. The following excerpts from Susan's "Accepting Happiness" poem pinpoint so many of my students' dilemmas. I picked Susan's poem because it mirrored, more clearly, poems written by four other students.

To accept my flaws, and quit believing others
Who tell me I am not good enough.
This would be an ideal situation
To wake up every morning happy with me
To look in the mirror and be happy with what I see
But I can't accept my flaws and be happy
If I sit back and accept me for me
I will gain nothing

In stanza one, Susan articulated the idea common among my students that because they inherently understood themselves to be flawed in numerous yet varied ways, they

¹¹⁵ Hooks 2000

¹¹⁶ Hooks 2000

chose not to love or be “happy with” something that was not anywhere near perfect. Like Susan, some of my students had been told they were “not good enough”, so they were lacking the “ideal” feeling, which is to wake up and be happy with whom you are and able to love and accept the image of self in the mirror. When they saw themselves as flawed, the idea of accepting themselves was irrational because, as Susan argued, “I will gain nothing”, which implied the flawed self she was at the time must have been nothing. Given the ideal as their standard, they had no other choice but to come up lacking with the wish to further distance themselves from the person they saw themselves as, which explains why Susan wanted to change herself in stanza two.

The idea of change scares me
I would have to try to be better
The thought of change brings confusion and frustration
Changing would be accepting the fact
That I am not happy with myself
It would mean admitting something
That I've tried to hide from the world
And from myself
So sitting in this flawed state is fine for now
But when will it not be fine?

Susan argued that to change herself was an extremely difficult thing to do for a high school student who had mastered the art of fitting in. She had faked a happy identity and found her niche, so to change or erase the flawed self was scary because that was the only world or self she knew. Why risk a new self or identity when the fake one seemed both functional and acceptable to the world? I think the risk was worth taking because deep down, Susan knew that “she” was just hiding. The Susan she wanted to be was the Susan who knew the truth about herself and needed to find the courage to make the changes necessary to be happy with herself.

It bothered me that many students like Susan drew their power from believing they were not worth loving in their current state. This type of perspective was the rationalization for how the world around them treated them as well as how they saw and treated themselves. They seemed to take comfort in the idea that since they knew they needed work, there was no permanence to the flawed state they currently existed in. Their hope lay in the fact that maybe one day they would have the courage to love and be themselves when they got tired of being fake and unhappy. If after eighteen years they had not gotten tired enough to take action, why would I, as their teacher, believe that day was ever going to come if I left them on their own to manage these issues? I felt an obligation to help them begin to find the courage to change themselves so they could love themselves. I believed that I had an obligation to push them in their thinking about loving themselves. I believed that poetry and this class were excellent vehicles for this type of education, but I had to make some pedagogical adjustments to meet the needs of my students.

The second incident that drove me to write a letter to the entire class occurred a day after I got Susan's poem. While sitting in the class composing poetry, some of my students said that they couldn't write and wanted to have a poetry reading instead. I decided to listen to them and asked who wanted to read one of the poems they had written. Jasmine read a poem, and during the ensuing discussion, she said, "I guess I see the way boys treat the pretty girls, and I want that, too." I pointed out to her that she still had not included herself in the pretty girl category. She put her head down, and said, "yeah, I guess I still don't love myself yet." Several female students told her not to feel bad because she wasn't alone. The bell was going to cut off the discussion, so I asked the

entire class to write about where they stood in terms of loving themselves. The next day, I received letters from all but three students and was surprised at how their answers were remarkably similar across racial and gender lines.

The letters they wrote were the third and final incident that drove me into the action of writing the class a dialogic letter. The letters they wrote fell into two main categories. First, there were the students who did not say they loved themselves, but they did like themselves much more than the person they used to be. Usually that other person was so bad or had so many problems that they could not help but feel better about who they currently were. Marlon wrote in his letter, “considering what I was doing before, yeah I love myself now, but I kinda don’t because I am having so many problems with being a senior and dealing with the whole college thing”. Like Marlon, many students separated an “old self” from their “new self”. Some students went so far as to say they hated their old selves, and even though they liked themselves now, with time they might grow to hate their current self, too. Sondra and Mark both talked about feeling good about themselves now because they no longer were the extremely troubled person they used to be. Remembering the old self and knowing they still had work to do, kept them from complete self love, but they did love themselves now. The two students who claimed to be closest to loving themselves were Hank and Ayo who both agreed they had flaws, but they were pretty sure they loved themselves. These responses were replete with tentativeness and hesitation. They hated their old selves, so loved their new self almost by default. I believed this was a default form of love because as soon as they said they loved themselves they qualified it with an “I think”, an “I guess”, or they just took back the statement entirely. The “new self”, as they called it, was just temporarily better

than rock bottom, so they liked or loved this self temporarily. The encouraging news from this group is that they understood the love of self to be a series of ebbs and flows. They knew they had the potential to change and love themselves more because they had experienced overcoming their self hatred. Now they just needed to move past only tolerating and liking their current self to actually loving that self. Even if they changed who they were again in the future, that was not an excuse not to love who they currently were until this distant future change occurred, bringing a complete love of self. This group seemed to have settled for a temporary identity that was only adequate in relation to the old identity they knew was significantly flawed.

The other category of letter was the group that shocked me. They basically interpreted the question ‘do you love yourself’ as a rhetorical one. Their answers were characterized by the phrase “of course I don’t love myself”. Laura wrote in her letter, “I feel like if I looked better or if I was more intelligent, then I would be able to talk to more people. I am stuck caring about what others think. Of course I don’t like myself, especially when I am tired and just want to sleep”.

While Desi’s list of reasons that influenced why she didn’t like herself included her parents’ negative views of her, the fake person she was forced to be at home and school, not being able to do what others could, and her past, Susan’s list included her appearance, not being good enough in general, other girls being better than her, grades not being good enough, her habit of settling for mediocre, and not knowing if her friendships were real.

Peggy thought she understood why she could not love herself. She wrote, “If I could put others first, I could love myself more. There are other issues, but I am avoiding

confronting those feelings at all even though I know it is delaying self acceptance. Self love is something I can't achieve by the end of this school year, or through this class. I need to face inner questions and I don't want to. It's hard, acceptance is hard."

Adam also had doubts about whether or not he would be able accept himself: to him loving yourself meant actually loving who you are. "I need to get rid of some physical dependencies, I need to stop slacking off so much, I need to be more productive, I need to stop being such a coward and stop lying so I won't seem like such a fuck up, and maybe then I'll be able to love myself. Honestly I don't know if I will, but if I manage to pull all of these things off, we'll see won't we." What was disturbing with Adam and Peggy's letters was that even if they could erase the immediate hurdles to self love, they had other hurdles that would come into play for each of them. Loving themselves seemed like an impossible mission to bail out the water in a sinking boat with a spoon.

Jesse also argued that loving self was too difficult because he had never been entirely in love with another person, and it was hard to love yourself when "you do not know yourself better than the next stranger that walks by" and "you don't really care that much for life at this point anyway, or your future. It is just easier to do nothing and sleep." Mary's case echoed many of the concerns from the other letters from this group of students. "I know I don't love myself or even like myself most days. I am not perfect though I want to be, yet I know I can't be. I have friends, parents, and family telling me everyday 'you're stupid' or 'you're a bitch', and though I don't listen anymore, their words linger. People make me feel unworthy to hang out with or talk to. Nobody has time for my problems. This is hard to explain, it makes more sense in my mind than on

this paper.” It was not any one comment in particular, but the accumulation of comments about not loving themselves that bothered me and forced me into action.

Why I had to write my letter

Reading their letters, I became aware of their particular views of themselves and their displeasure with their identities. Their view was that given their feelings of inadequacy, they were not worthy of loving themselves. Originally, I had planned to use critical literacy theories alone as a way to help me address issues of self and identity. One critical literacy approach would have been to continue a discussion about why they did not love themselves and why their measuring stick for self love was grounded in the social. I saw merit in that critical literacy approach, but when I centralized caring about students, that particular approach was not going to be enough for me. My understanding of critical literacy theory broadened to an understanding that love was an essential piece in all of my teaching. Just understanding their lack of self love was not enough, moving them to a critical consciousness was my new challenge. I knew I cared about my students because their lack of self love was disturbing, but I knew I loved my students because their negative views of self actually hurt me. I was deeply saddened by the view they had because it was so far away from the view I had of them. I was angry at the various social factors and people who made my students feel this way, but just helping them discuss the social foundations of their feelings wasn't sufficient enough in my mind. It mattered to me so much, I would not be satisfied at having them simply think critically about these issues; I wanted to help them bring about a change and transform their attitudes about self. The love and concern I felt at that time needed to be expressed to my

students, so once again I turned to the dialogic letter. This time, however, I wrote one letter to the entire class.

In so many ways, these letters they wrote, along with Susan's poem and Jasmine's poetry reading, became instances of teachable moments within my classroom to demonstrate my love for my students. I simply refused to let disempowering and dehumanizing language flourish without my direct intervention. I simply loved them too much to allow this to go unchallenged. I wrote the class this letter to show them the love I had for them and for myself. I also intended for the letter to help them take a critical look at their stance of not loving themselves and to invite them into a much needed dialogue about their lack of self love. Below is the letter I wrote to the class in its entirety, because it is important to know exactly what I said to them in order to contextualize their response to my letter. Each student got a copy of the letter at the beginning of class. After reading the letter, they wrote their responses.

I wish I could give you my eyes

Maybe I am just a foolish idealistic teacher. Maybe I am the one that is confused and deranged. Maybe the rest of society is right and I am the optimistic outcast. Is it possible that society's influence is more powerful than I had imagined? Is it possible that the changes and bright future I see really don't exist due to the persuasive powers of peers, parents, pessimists, and pragmatists? After reading your loving yourself letters and upon reflection of the class discussion after Jasmine's poem, you all really made me question myself for a minute. Actually, it was more like a second or two, but it was enough time to make me realize that it was letter time again. The way you see yourselves made me wonder if I had been doing you any good this year, and if the writing and search for understanding of self and your relationship to society were having any effect. The questioning and doubt I experienced had to be a temporary lapse into insanity on my part.

If I let myself question the direction of the class and our discussions for more than that second, I feel as if I am letting each and every one of you down. I would feel like the world's biggest fraud if I let a seed of doubt enter into my head about you all as thinkers, writers, people, and fellow journeymen on this quest that revolves around future happiness. I can't bear the thought that any of you would think that I had given up, well actually given in, to your pessimistic, powerless, unchanging, negative views about self, and life. If I give in or show weakness, it seems like I have given you the escape portal to give up completely, saying, even Mr. Daniel doesn't believe.

The more I think about it, it was more sadness than doubt that I was experiencing. Even the best of your letters and comments (by best I mean you said you did love your self now) in the discussion spoke about how there was a past self that you either hated or despised. The other letters and comments were the ones that stated as fact that you did not love yourself. You all say it like there is no doubt in the world that you could love yourself and that in fact you are not supposed to love yourself. Many of you seem to have a laundry list of things that you don't like about yourself, from not being perfect to not being able to stop doing certain things, from not being pretty to not being smart enough, from not being able to forget the bad things people say about you to not being able to forget the bad things you think about yourself.

Did anyone ever tell you that you are allowed to love yourself flaws and all? Your flaws aren't reasons not to love you; they are just simply part of you. Yes, they may be things you need to work on or improve, but that has nothing to do with loving you. Did anyone ever tell you that you can love your strengths and your weaknesses, your perfections and your imperfections, simply because they are yours? For example, I have a little flab around my belly, and yes, I will get around to working out again, and yes, I feel guilty about not working out, but I still love me. It is my fat and it is part of me, so while I have it I love it, and anyone who doesn't like it can kiss my #!. Worry about your own issues, leave me and mine alone. Yes, I get very defensive about my flaws because they are mine. I may be rude sometimes, but I won't let anyone make me feel bad about it because it is my bad habit. I will work on it, but until it is gone, I accept it as part of me. What is the point of having a flaw if you are not going to embrace, then examine, it in order to figure out how it got into your world? You don't withhold self love because of the flaw, you allow your self love to recognize the flaws and deal with each in time.*

As far as society, home, friends, enemies, and anyone else out there feeding you negativity, when are you all going to stop internalizing their view of you and allowing yourselves to become alienated, disempowered, and disenfranchised? What do I have to do to get you all to see what I see when I look at you? Short of physically ripping out my eyes, I am almost out of ideas. I can't just keep telling you that you are great even though you need to hear it. I am tempted to name each of you and list your talents, but it just seems so hokey. You are all one of the smartest and most talented groups of students I have ever seen. You all are critical thinkers, artists, and most importantly, painfully human, which means you are compassionate and fragile. You have all been sold a load of crap: That what the world tells you or thinks dictates your own perceptions, that perfection is something worth striving for, which ensures you will always be deficient. You believe that there are unchanging forces in control of the world and the way things work. You believe that power and control is out of your reach. You believe in everything there is to believe in except one thing. You refuse to believe in the possibility of you. Why not? What is so overwhelming about allowing yourself to believe that you can do what you want in life, do the things that will make you happy, control your destiny, be original, and live up to your potential? Is it that this belief comes at a price? That you will have to take responsibility for your life and have no one left to blame for your misery? I know it is scary, but your current strategies have not gotten you to the place you want to be. You have tried so many things, yet you won't try simply going all out for the things you want in life. Taking the giant risks, refusing to hide in sleep, denial, self pity, feelings of inadequacy, laziness, headphones, parental troubles, or anything else.

At some point, you just have to get tired of beating yourself up. Why not be the one person, who no matter what happens, accepts you and defends you from the rest of the world? What will it take to turn this corner? What scares me the most is that some of you are thinking that you just need some other people to build you up and believe in you. You are enough. It only takes you to turn the corner. What frustrates me most is that I can't make you believe in yourself and love yourself. I can't beat the crap out of you every time you allow the outside world to make you doubt yourself. I can't find the answers to help you. I wish teaching were simpler. Maybe the answer is that there is no answer. Self love may just simply be a process. It may be something that we can discuss, and write about, and think together about, and learn about and slowly but surely have the courage to implement - to love our imperfect selves. Is this a journey worth taking together? As you think about your books, continue to write about the future, ask what is

next for you, and what have you learned from your past? How have your past experiences shaped you? What have they turned you into? How have they taught you to feel about yourself? And what are you going to do as you encounter similar experiences and people in the future to ensure better outcomes, and a greater love of self?

Giving myself to my students

This section is intended to help clarify what my thinking and intent were in crafting the letter the way I did to my students. First, I will examine the letter section by section explaining my goals. Then, I will examine my students' reaction to my letter.

My intent in the opening paragraph was to let them know how much doubt they had instilled in me after being overwhelmed by their letters and inability to love themselves. I also wanted them to understand that I would not give in to their negative view of the world or themselves. In order for me to continue to love myself as their teacher, I knew I had to write to them. I had to express my true feelings. After establishing why I was writing to them, I decided to summarize their letters to let them see how much they had in common with each other. I hoped that upon seeing that others experienced the same difficulty loving themselves, they might be able to stop looking at themselves as the cause. There were too many of them feeling this way for it to be their own individual problem or weakness. Ending this possible isolation was important because as Hooks argued, self love cannot flourish in isolation.¹¹⁷ My students if left isolated would have no one to blame but themselves. Seeing others in the same dilemma and having a dialogue could help them develop their ability to love self.

In the fourth paragraph I used the rhetorical questions about accepting one's flaws because of Susan's poem and because I knew the answer for most of them was going to

¹¹⁷ Hooks 2000.

be no. I followed the questions with an example from my life because I did not want to seem too preachy or act as if I were perfect. By sharing what I viewed my flaws to be, I was trying to let them see that I was human, too, but I did not have to allow those flaws to stop me from loving myself. I wanted to present an example of how taking ownership of *all* of oneself could be empowering. I was attempting to engage them in critical thought about why they did not love themselves by providing an alternative view from my own experiences for them to digest. That view was ownership over all aspects of your body and mind. Hooks¹¹⁸ argues that although it is rare to be able to extend unconditional love to others (because we cannot control what they will do and how we will react), we can and must extend unconditional love to ourselves (because we can control our own actions). I was trying to model this theory for my student in my letter as a possibility for their lives.

The fifth paragraph was supposed to express my love for them because I wanted them to not only see what I saw when I looked at them, but also to believe me, so they could consider a more loving view of themselves. This affirmation of students is vital to Hooks because she views affirmation as a way to encourage love of self because affirmation aids self recovery. I wanted them to understand that the power to love the self was within each of them, so I spoke to them about the power of possibility and tried to help them see that they did have agency when it came to loving themselves. I wanted them to see the answer as an active, internal one, not a passive, external one. Hooks argues that our inner voices judge us and we buy into the negative judgment because it is more realistic than the positive because we hear the negative about ourselves more often

¹¹⁸ Hooks 2000.

from outside forces.¹¹⁹ I needed my students to see that they had a choice about who to listen to and could choose to accept the positive view of self that I believed existed within each of them.

I also wanted them to understand that I knew it was scary to try to love yourself, but I hoped that they had the courage to try. In essence, that was all I was asking with the series of questions at the end of that paragraph and the ones at the conclusion of the letter. I tried to let them know it was a process they were engaging in, not a simple mental adjustment, so that they would not get frustrated when the change was not immediate. I had made that mistake myself and allowed myself to become frustrated by their not accepting and loving themselves on my time schedule. I realized that the changes they needed to make were not in my power to make happen. The power was within them, and my role was to help them embrace their own power.

Re-reading that letter now, I realize the risks I took. At the time, I wasn't really trying to teach them while I was writing the letter, I was just being me. I understand now that I was teaching them; I just wasn't using traditional methods or pedagogy - I was using my own. That letter served, in so many ways, as a catalyst for student and teacher change. I took the risk to give myself to them. I shared my emotions, my flaws, my doubts, and my thoughts about teaching and teaching them. It would seem to some like a big deal to be as honest and vulnerable as I was, but it wasn't. I was just writing to the people with whom I had spent much time. I trusted them to respect me and see my views. I was not demanding, but inviting them, into a dialogue. I really wanted to know and understand why they did not see what I saw when I looked at them. I had the curiosity - no, the need-to understand them because I cared about their human and

¹¹⁹ Hooks 2000.

emotional well being. I was also giving the real me to them and hoping that they too would take the risk and give the real them to me, so that we could develop our relationships and come to a deeper understanding of self. This letter is what I call expressing love because I was telling them how much I honestly thought of them, but I was also transferring the burden onto their shoulders. I was challenging them to have the courage to love themselves, or at least consider the act.

I also see that talking to them about loving themselves forced me to think about loving myself as a teacher. Part of the doubt I had about my ability to help them turned into a lack of confidence, which made me question myself as a teacher. I wasn't 100% sure about teaching through letter writing and expressing love, so I did not trust the type of teacher I was and in essence "love" that teacher self as I had been imploring them to do with their selves. I think I finally saw that we do need feedback from other people before we can complete our identity and trust it, which means in some ways our image of self is related to others' image of us. Unlike my students, however, I had found that trust and love for so many other aspects of me that I was not willing to give up or abandon my stance, just question it. I could lie and say that I, like all good teachers, was just questioning my practice, which keeps me sharp and willing to improve. I won't take that as an out; instead, I will just admit to feeling like my students and allow my readers, critics, and supporters to use that to evaluate my teaching. Something else, however, stopped me from giving into that fear and doubt and choosing not to love the teacher I was. I think it came from my past teaching successes and the real fear of letting my current students down. If I didn't follow through and believe in and love the teacher I was trying to be in this poetry class, then how could I expect them to love themselves? It

also helped that my self assessment of the teacher I was and aspired to be was a positive and empowering image for me. What I realized was that if I took away my past success and my positive image, my will to love myself would dissipate like so many of my students'. From my own experience then, I learned that one may need that one success to build on, and it can come from the love of a teacher. Once they saw they were loved for who they were, it could help them realize that who they were was not as bad as they had envisioned.

I had lofty hopes for this one letter. Though ambitious, the letter was necessary because it let my students know who I was and what I hoped and saw as a possibility for them in their lives. Whether all of my intentions were met is not the real point of the dialogic letter. It is, rather, important to remember the key point that the dialogic letter promotes thought and further dialogue on the part of students. The dialogic letter is a vehicle to allow students to begin to examine self. Therefore, the focus will now shift to how students were able to use my dialogic letter to begin to reexamine their love of self.

The dialogue generated by my letter

This section takes a closer look at one student's reaction to the letter and presents an in depth analysis of one response rather than a surface view of the ten letters received from my students. This section focuses on Desi's letter, because it was a bit of a surprise that the first letter I received was from Desi, who was one of the main people who swore she could not love herself. I also chose her letter because it provided insight into her dilemma and because her views represented many of the views expressed in the other letters I received. Her letter conveys the view that self love is the same as conceit, also presented in two other letters. In the minds of Desi, Susan, and Sondra, loving oneself is

a bad thing. They had seen people who loved themselves too much and society frowned on them. They argued that it was more socially acceptable to have a healthy disdain for oneself. Desi's letter will also be the focus of this section because she removed many of the doubts I had about my teaching. What Desi clearly taught me in her letter was that I needed to keep the faith, which I took to mean faith in me, them, and us. The other letters also spoke about me not giving up on them, so her letter is representative of that point as well. Desi's letter also explained in the greatest detail why she could not love her current self, and provided the most insight into the old and new selves my students were addressing in their letters. The final reason I selected Desi's letter over the others is because her letter touched my emotions the most. It was her sincerity and earnest desire for a better existence that moved me the most and let me know I was fulfilling my job as their teacher through my comments on their poems and the use of dialogic letters. The bold face sections are hers.

*Dear Mr. Daniel,
Deandre and I just finished talking on instant messenger, said our nightly goodnights, and usually at this time I'd be in bed with the radio blasting inconsequential classic music blah, eventually falling asleep.*

But I'm not. I thought that I owed it to you, at least this much (if not more), to spend some time and write this letter. I didn't want to put it off, and just write it during class because I knew I would not be able to write an honest letter that way. I really like to be in my own bubble when I'm writing, which is probably why I spend time in class talking instead.

*If I haven't said it before, I'll say it now; if it wasn't for first period advanced composition class (more so you), **I would have dropped out.** Please don't take that lightly. School irritates me to no end. Usually by the end of the day, whatever salvageable mood I have is imminently replaced by depressive and anti social behavior. I lash out on friends and family and am unmotivated to do well, to be happy, or to simply smile and wave when a familiar person walks by.*

*Yet, if I see you prancing along (yes I use the word prancing), I immediately feel like smiling, and being cheerful, acknowledging your presence, and as we both walk away I feel **grateful**. I'm grateful to have finally met a teacher who doesn't just pass out worksheets, or reads from a text book. Basically, you could've easily just sat there, read our class a book called "Creative Writing for Dummies", but you didn't. I highly appreciate that. You took time out of your own, and decided that you would be the optimistic, caring teacher who looked out for students, not only as pupils, but as peoples, (pun intended).*

Looking around this school, I cannot find a teacher I respect more than you. Sure, for a while there was my drama teacher, who I also respect, but if I were to rank my teachers starting with 9th grade till now, never would I have been so sure, and I am now, to say that **you are the best teacher I have ever had**. And please, the word 'teacher' deprives you of the person you really are; an honest, intelligent man who takes time out of his own time to write his students letters, treating them as if they too deserved to be human beings, to be cared about, even if their own parents didn't seem to care.

This brings me to the best of what I can call an 'answer' to your prodding questions. I did love myself once, as a child. I would think of myself not as mere "Desi" but as "The Desi", the great omnipotent girl better than everyone and anyone. Often I'd smile at myself during random intervals throughout the day and think to myself, "Wow, you are such a super duper person! You're Desi! You're the best!" (Yes, excuse my use of the words super duper I was 5).

But the fact of the matter is, I did love myself. I believed that I had the highest confidence a girl could possibly have, and I did. Looking back during that moment in 4th grade, I remember during a light bulb experiment and thinking my light bulb was the special one, because it was lit by me. That is how self-centered, conceited, and/or selfish I was. Those words bring me to my next point.

Growing up one is taught to be anything but "self-centered", "conceited", or "selfish". We are taught to be modest, to hide our true feelings, but to be conscious of others' feelings. Maybe perhaps that is why I believe what negative things others have said about me, rather than believing in myself, or even nearing towards the idea of self acceptance. Society teaches us to value others before ever valuing ourselves. Society thinks it's being correct in teaching us to "care about others" while actually implementing the simple notion over and over again that, "You aren't adequate, but he is. Care about what he said, because he is probably better than you. Listen to what she said because she's probably right, and you are wrong. **Care about others, care less about yourself.**"

We as humans are flawed creatures. We can't find the balance between caring about others while still being "conceited" about ourselves. We need to accept the fact that most people won't like the fact that we are conceited, or that we love ourselves because it is scary and uncommon. We fear the different, the rebels, the revolutionaries, the people that have the ability to change the world, because we simply fear change, and disorder. We fear disorder may lead to corruption. We as humans do everything we can to fit in, to conform, to feel comfortable, to feel normal. Look around you, if not around the classroom, look around the building, look outside, look at the rest of the city, the county, the state, the country, and the planet. Most people don't love themselves, and most people don't realize until it's too late that they are forgoing themselves and their identity, for the sake of others. And that's unhealthy. Why? I speak from experience.

As I began to grow older and wiser (ha-ha)... I realized that if I wanted to function in the world as a normal person, I'd have to stop loving myself. That's heartbreak number one. Heartbreak number two? You guessed it: my parents.

You can correct me on this one if you want, but parents are supposed to love their children right? Parents as I see it, are supposed to love their kids, and support their kids in whatever decisions, statements, inquiries... anything they might need, because their kids are also a part of themselves. Yet what happens when a parent refuses to acknowledge their child's true identity, however horrible they might believe it to be, thus shunning them of parental love and acceptance, thus making them believe that they aren't worthy of being loved, or even loving themselves? This equals a depressive, withdrawn, anti-social child who suffers in relationships with friends, family, and the opposite sex. This equals a confused child who doesn't know who to believe or trust. This equals a child, who at age 18 (considered to be a legal adult), still cries at night about the past. About how her parents have beat her, refused to let her date, express herself, or ever get to know the real her. This equals a person, who most of the time doesn't even have the confidence to feel like a person but instead she feels like a burden, feels as if maybe she

wasn't supposed to be born, that perhaps she is useless, and has no real purpose at all. I'm sure by now you realize I am talking about myself.

Children need to feel accepted by their parents, because without their parents they wouldn't exist. I myself feel the need to put my parents before my needs and wants. When I don't, I constantly feel guilty... for example by dating Deandre. Without my parents, no matter how evil or cruel I might think they are, I would not be here. I can't just focus on me and what is best for me. My parents are part of me.

It is 1:07 a.m., I have to get to sleep soon, or I won't wake up in time tomorrow morning to drink my highly caffeinated tea, thus will not be able to function throughout the rest of the day. But anyways, what all this babble really means is... please don't lose faith in us, because maybe you're the only faith we have right now. Until we can learn to forget the past, and to forget the others (parents, society, etc.), we need a mentor and a friend to help guide us along the way to a possibly bright future.

And although I may fight your beliefs most of the time, (sometimes I just do it out of spite, it's quite fun...haha), I am trying to understand them and accept them as my own. Believe it or not, I am. In short, I want to grow up and be very much like you. I want to love myself. Perhaps I need to.

The seeds of change

The following section examines the dialogue that my dialogic letter evoked from Desi. The section takes a look at how my letter helped her rethink herself and her world as well as how it helped me rethink my teaching. It also illustrates the potential power of expressing love to students.

Desi's letter helps me explain the nature of a loving relationship between teacher and student. In a world that was "inconsequential" to her, she took time to write a letter to me because she felt she "owed me". The funny thing is that there was no grade and the letter was not a class assignment, but she felt she had to respond. That response is because of our personal relationship. She was thinking critically about self because she accepted my invitation into dialogue and was too courteous not to reply.

She, the "unmotivated", was motivated in a school that "irritated" her because a teacher took time to care about his students. It took nothing more than one loving teacher to help lessen her alienation from school. She felt a little more connected to school because of me and our class and said she no longer wanted to "drop out of school". I did not take her dropping out lightly; instead I used her proclamation to firm up my belief in

expressing love and using dialogic letters. The power of my pedagogical choices and practice was evidenced by their reaching a student who had been depressed and “anti social” due to the alienation she had continually experienced in school. If I could bring her back into the dialogue of school and life, I had confidence I could reach others students as well.

The alternative view of a teacher I provided her with made her see that the word teacher didn't have to be a bad thing. My act of writing to students and sharing seemed to validate her humanity. I had not seen this as an intent of the dialogic letter, but I do believe that Desi was correct because she felt respected, equal, and human because of the personal letter. My personal letter to them made her realize that I saw her as a person, not just a “pupil”, a number, or just a face I had to teach, who was not on the same level as the “teacher”. My role as teacher, as authority figure, as man, as father figure, who actually cared about his students provided her with a stark contrast to what she knew of the world: society and parents would not validate who she was, which made her feel guilty for being an inadequate burden. She let me know that the role of a loving teacher provided her with hope. I gave her faith that a brighter future was possible. She needed a loving teacher to be a friend, a mentor, and a guide to possibility. The key here is that I had tried to express my love for her and the rest of my students, and according to her, I had been successful. She felt loved and was grateful. I don't believe students should have to feel this grateful for something so basic as being loved; this should be a common feeling for all students instead of the opposite rejection Desi so often experienced in school.

She argued that calling me a teacher would not do me justice because it would rob me of my humanity. The offering of myself and my time showed her that I was human and hopefully it let her see that all teachers are actually human, which may help her reconnect with school by giving other teachers a chance. To me, she simply gave the best definition of a teacher I have ever heard: a guide to possibility. That definition spoke to me because it is the language of hope and possibility that teachers must become fluent in if they hope to draw alienated students back into schools and our lives. But, if I had not taken the time and had the courage to open up to her and be that smiling face “prancing” in the hallway, she would have never allowed me to guide her anywhere because I would have just been a “teacher”, which was not a word associated with respect or humanity or Desi.

Desi argued that she had been conditioned to care about others not herself, so it was very difficult for her to put herself first as I had suggested in my letter. In fact, she argued that to fit in and be considered a “normal person”, she had to stop loving herself. Though this withholding of self love broke her heart, it was just easier to go along with the way she saw society going. My questions were helping her think about whether she really enjoyed the state she was in. The dialogic letter I had written had pushed her into critical reflection, which awakened the discontent she felt with being unloved by so many people in her life including herself. She knew she was living an “unhealthy” existence.

She had a desire to want to love herself again because she saw from me that it was possible and remembered that it had once been possible for herself when she was still a naive child. By opening myself up and showing her who I was and that I loved my flaws, social pressure and all, she felt the need for the first time in a long time to want to love

herself again. It is important to understand that a “confused child who doesn’t know who to trust” chose to trust in me. I believe opening up to her in my letter helped her to know and trust me. She trusted me with the knowledge that although she was not allowed to date, she was talking to her boyfriend late at night, and she trusted me enough to want to work with me to help adjust her feelings about herself. She trusted me because she didn’t feel like a burden to me because I was taking my own time to get to know the real her.

This level of critical insight and critical understanding of self that Desi engaged in during her letter to me was all that I could ask for as a teacher. She recognized and acknowledged she needed to love herself in this society because she had seen that the social and parental worlds wouldn’t embrace her. She knew the letter I wrote her was not just a letter, but an invitation to dialogue or a “prodding” to action as she called it.

Otherwise, she would have simply gone to bed that night owing her teacher or herself nothing. She would have let the mass media-her radio- continue to anesthetize her that night. It was the love I expressed for her that helped her want to have that same feeling for herself. What Desi was telling me was that she did in fact need my eyes. She needed my vision of the world, my vision of myself, and my vision of her. To me that is why she said I was the only “faith” she had right then.

In conclusion, my expressions of love and the dialogic letters must be a continued component of my pedagogy, because in addition to everything I intended them to do for my students, they gave my students hope and faith for their futures. Desi seemed to have hope that school was a place where she could grow and at least understood that loving herself was a possibility and a reality she wanted to return to. Dialogic letters and love as pedagogy are humanizing because they offer students the

possibility to see, understand, accept, embrace, and love their flawed human selves. Desi demonstrated this not only in her letter, but in the changes she was able to make in her views of self, which are the subject of the final chapter. The dialogic letter had the power to validate my students' humanity because of the personal human to human bonding that took place through dialogue. It was my expression of love to and affirmation of Desi that allowed this human connection to become possible. She took steps to love herself partly because she realized someone loved her in her flawed state. The responses to my letters were valuable because students were given an opportunity to examine and articulate their own views, and I was presented avenues to learn more about them and their thinking, which better equipped me to push them further in ensuing dialogues.

In the final section of this chapter, I explore another female student's response to my dialogic letter, which provides an further example of love and dialogue as process. The process is often messy and uncertain, but this exchange is intended to serve as an example of the type of process that I went through with each individual student, male or female. The focus has been more heavily on these particular females because their stories were the most diverse and complicated. Jasmine and Desi in particular are highlighted because they unfold throughout each chapter.

“I no longer need your eyes”

This section contains a case which exemplifies the pedagogical process with one student by providing evidence of teacher and student dialogue, critical thinking about self, relationship building, resistance, teacher and student growth, and expressions of

love. This case is essential because it is too difficult to understand the complexities of expressing love and using dialogue to promote change that I introduced in this chapter without also seeing how I worked with my students in the classroom context. This section then is about practice and the messiness of trying to unpack and help reshape a student's self image through love and dialogue. A large section of this chapter focuses on Jasmine because, like Desi, she too wrote a powerful response to my dialogic letter to the class about loving themselves. This section starts with her letter to me, then recounts the journey that Jasmine and I went on together to help her write that letter. The journey starts with her initial negative self image, goes through her struggles to love and accept herself and her body as beautiful, then demonstrates the various ways she began to revise her self image. This section also demonstrates how the work of critical literacy can be achieved through dialogic letters and expressions of love.

Dear Mr. Daniel,

4/9/04

I don't need your eyes. When I first came to your class, I was bitter, resentful and very negative about myself. But over the spring break, I re-read everything I had been writing about and all of those notes containing advice you have been giving me and I noticed that I don't want to write about hurt any more. I don't want to write about my low self-esteem or old men or immature boys, or even the ideal love I was always talking about. Something inside me told me to just let go and just ride. Once I stopped beating myself up, I found myself looking in the mirror a little more. I find myself admiring my facial features and my physique. I started accepting the words "beautiful" and "unique" as characteristics of myself. And before I thought I was healed from this type of depression but I proved myself wrong when we had the class discussion about my poem and I did not include myself when I was talking about the pretty girls. And what I realized is that it's not about them. It's about me. All those things I said only "pretty girls" get was a way of excluding myself and thinking that I don't deserve anything they receive. But I do. See, before I wouldn't agree because of how I have been treated. I know I deserve respect and chivalry because Jasmine is beautiful, one of a kind and will not settle for less. I noticed that I do have a little more confidence. I've been blunt and straight forward to plenty of guys who had approached me and I didn't even think twice about if I should say it or not. I don't think about my ideal love anymore. I feel as if a man should have me, then he must be the luckiest man on earth because my standard bar is raised so high now. I finally feel my value. I was told my value so many times but I never believed it. But after letting go of being hurt and just sitting down in my own dirt, I finally feel it. I'm priceless. I am more beautiful than the morning sunrise (that's from my Sweet Nothings poem). I don't have to settle for less. I can demand respect. I can finally see myself. It's like walking into a steamy bathroom and looking at a foggy mirror. The image is not clear. But once you wipe the glass, you can see clearly what was hidden. See, I

don't need your eyes, Mr. Daniel, because I can see just fine with my own now. I think without your eyes it would have taken me a lot longer for me to achieve 20/20 vision. And I want to thank you again and again for believing in me that I would finally reach nirvana and inner peace. I'm just sorry that it took me so long to respond to your letter. I wanted to make sure that my new emotions were not just too good to be true. But here it is written on paper that your attempts to reach your students were not in vain because I'm halfway there.

Thank You

Jasmine.

Teaching as a corrective lens

Jasmine's letter was the most refreshing and reassuring to me as a teacher because it was her poem that initiated the "loving yourself dialogue". Her mirror metaphor helped me recognize that an acceptance of self is a long process; an evolution not to be rushed and looked at for immediate results. She even thought she was healed, but then realized that the depression she had endured about not loving herself was not so easy to erase. I understood from Jasmine that my students couldn't see or understand themselves clearly for all of the personal, social, and psychological fog covering their perception of self. While 20/20 vision of self and one's relationship to society is something we must strive towards, it may take a series of corrective lenses to achieve this clarity. Jasmine helped me understand that my eyes were necessary because they were one of her much needed corrective lenses. I realized I could serve as a corrective lens for my students' eyes, simply helping them correct the poor visions of themselves that had been systematically shown to them by their families, friends, teachers, school, and society. Rather than think about whether I was trying in vain to reach them, I should have been thinking of what would have happened to them had I not tried to reach them. What if they had never had the experience of a critical literacy writing workshop run by a caring teacher who was willing to dialogue with them and offer love? Had Jasmine never been

offered another view of herself, she might still be looking for herself in bad men and settling for their attention to ease the pain of not feeling she deserved anything better. Had she not begun to find her self-worth, what would I have been worth as a teacher? In many ways, the success of my students in terms of the way they viewed themselves had come to define success for me as a teacher in this class. Without this approach to writing, it would have taken Jasmine a lot longer to be able to see herself, for herself, as she wrote.

Jasmine: A first look

Part of the reason Jasmine took so long to see herself as valuable and beautiful was because of where she began. Her view of herself as expressed in her letter to me was dramatically different from the view expressed in her first poems, which projected the view that she was in fact ugly, and that even though she had grown physically attractive to men, she was still just an object to them – they still neither saw her nor cared for her. This contributed to her view of herself as unlovable and explained the bitterness, resentment, and frustration she spoke about at the beginning of her letter. Here is one of the first poems she wrote in class, which illustrates exactly how she saw herself prior to our dialogues.

The Ugly Duckling
I remember when I was
Short
Skinny
With a dark complexion,
Needed braces
Wore glasses
And nobody wanted to call me their
Beauty
But as the years went by
My legs stretched
My body thickened
And my dark skin was now known as lovely

Now everyone wants to claim me as their Trophy.

This notion of being a trophy plagued Jasmine because though she was desired more; she was only an object to those who wanted her. As we dialogued about this poem, I asked her if she still thought she was an ugly duckling, and she said “no”, but based that assessment solely upon the grounds that boys and grown men wanted to have sex with her. It was at this point that the importance of a loving teacher must be emphasized. She only knew she wasn’t ugly because of men’s voices, not her own. But here I was, another grown heterosexual black man telling her she was beautiful, which had the potential to be read as further objectification of women. I believed I was acting in her best interest rather than objectifying her because I was responding to her text, which represented a vision of her self. I was rejecting her negative view of her own beauty because I believed she needed to reject her view as well. I had to play into the beauty issue because she was buying into the idea that she was not what society saw as beautiful. Naively, I expected her to believe me when I tried to affirm her beauty. It was no wonder that she could not believe me and internalize what I was saying about her appearance the first dozen times I told her she was pretty. I was unable to affirm her and alter her self image the way I had intended, because in her mind, as a man, I must have had a hidden agenda, and her worst fear was that yet again it would be a sexual one, so why pay much attention to what Mr. Daniel was telling her? Only by being a loving teacher who respected her and wanted nothing romantic or sexual from her could she see an alternate possibility in men and in herself. After all, men were not to be trusted, and yet here was one who was telling her what she needed to hear and did not want sex in return. I had to earn her respect and trust in order to help her think critically about

herself. I had to stand in opposition to the men she had come to know in her life and their agendas.

It didn't take her long to realize that I didn't have a hidden agenda, but a rather overt agenda. I had to have an overt agenda after reading her text, because while literacy is about being able to read and write; critical literacy is about exploration of reading and writing in terms of the social meanings reading and writing authorize or silence¹²⁰.

Critical literacy can help those students traditionally ignored to achieve a higher literacy level by helping them become self critical about the history of their experiences¹²¹. The goal of critical literacy is to make children's interests central to how texts work and how texts work in their world. Comber¹²² and most critical literacy advocates insist that texts were written for particular purposes, by particular people, and have consequences for their readers, producers, and users. The teaching of literacy is never neutral, but always embraces a particular perspective.

Jasmine learned that I just wanted her to feel good about herself, love herself, and live her life to the fullest because I saw the potential she possessed as an intelligent, talented, beautiful black woman. I wrote to her that I was "too aware of how society at large and within the black community systematically uses women like you as commodities, alienates you, and destroys your sense of self worth." I cared about Jasmine too much to allow the world to do that to yet another young black girl. I refused to let her go on not liking herself and perish, when she was going to meet plenty of people in the world willing to negate her to keep her down. She had produced a text in her "Ugly Duckling" poem that needed to be read from a non-neutral stance; to be silent

¹²⁰ Gilbert 1993.

¹²¹ Andrade & Morell 2000.

¹²² Comber 1999.

about my views of the text would not lead her to think critically about her self-produced images of the trophy or the ugly girl. Jasmine's view of herself, once articulated, had to become the center of our world because it was such a dangerous self image.

My concern for Jasmine stemmed from a social justice stance because I am a feminist, but my love for her made me act on those concerns and develop a pedagogical response to help her understand her worth in a world that said she had little to none unless she was naked. This pedagogical response was not intended to be a protective patriarchal male response. Instead, it was my pedagogy of love that wanted to help her see that she had the ability to love and protect herself and did not need a man to fill that role. She needed to understand that she had agency. It was because I gave her a different view of a man than she knew in her life outside of her father, a caring and loving male teacher, that she was able to trust me, which allowed me the opportunity to read more of her poetry and continue to help her develop a critical understanding of herself in society.

Dialogue as a catalyst for student action

Given my concerns for Jasmine's view of herself as ugly and unlovable, I had to look for opportunities in her poetry to continue our dialogue about her conceptualization of self. This next section illustrates a key poem from Jasmine that allowed me to push her in her thinking. A perfect example of me taking action by refusing to be neutral was when she wrote a poem about her buttocks. Jasmine knew it was because of her butt that so much attention was being paid to her. Men in her life told her it was really big and to them that meant it was magnificent. To Jasmine however, her butt became more of a nemesis. In fact she hated her butt and also hated herself for having it, which contributed

to her negative self image and failure to love her entire self. She wrote the following poem about her behind.

*You're too big
Misconceptions
False lovers
Alone
What good do you bring?
Disrespect
Unlucky
Stop following me
Nasty*

The poem itself was a list poem, but the problem with list poetry is it so often only touches on an issue and fails to provide insight. Her poem was no great literary work and needed revision, but it was her view of her body that needed the most revision, not her poem. “Students must use the tools of critical literacy to dismantle the half-truths, inaccuracies, and lies that strangle their conceptions about themselves, and others. They must use the tools of critical literacy to expose, to talk back to, and to remedy any act of injustice or intolerance that they witness.”¹²³ The talking back can be responses to their peers’ poems as well as to their own poems. Gee ¹²⁴ also argues for students to write back to the text in order to do justice to the text and to continue the dialogue the writer began. The word “nasty” troubled me. I did not like the way this young woman had been taught that her body was gross, by the reactions and actions of men she encountered. It had gotten so bad that she had disassociated herself from her body - her butt. She had to re-read her own text to begin to see and dismantle this half truth, inaccuracy, and lie about her body as nasty that was strangling her concept of herself. All I wrote in the white space at the bottom of her poem was, “See me; we need to talk”. I knew that dialogue was needed about this concept. The key was not for me to preach to

¹²³ Christensen 2000 page 6.

¹²⁴ Gee 1997.

her about her poem, but for her to look at and examine her own text. She accepted my invitation to dialogue. As we talked about her poem in a one-on-one conference, I encouraged her to write more about her body and begin to think critically about what was making her feel so bad about her butt and more importantly about her body and self. I asked her why she was taking her anger out on her own body, but all she said was, “that is just how I feel”. Here was the poem she wrote after I asked her to write to her butt and have a talk with her butt to clear the air once and for all. My intent was for her to come to terms with her body, but the poem she wrote further distanced herself from her body. She was in effect talking back to me and her own text, but I was surprised at the depth of her negative feelings about her body.

Ball of Muscle

*Don't say I should feel lucky that I have
a "banging booty" because You are a
Nasty, mutated, funny-looking, monstrously-
fat ball of muscle to me
I go through nothing but anxiety because of you
Stop following me
You attract bugs
Buzzing all around my ear
"Damn girl" "You're so phat" "Let me holla at ya so I can hit that."
Do you think I like all the hootin and hollerin?
Do you think I appreciate the boys (and men) drooling and staring at You?
You're a distraction
Giving people misconceptions of me.
They think just because you're (a)round
I'm easy
Nobody knows what my face looks like
because their eyes popped out and
rolled on the floor after seeing you.
Nobody knows the little things
Like my favorite color
Because they are blinded by wet dreams, and
Doggies and You.
How are You benefiting me
When all the "attention" you bring
Makes me feel so insignificant?
All these boys (and men) surrounding me
Oops. I mean you*

*I still feel alone
They scheme
To love you instead of to love me
When did you start becoming my enemy?
Why can't you do something good for me?
You thought me being famous for a body part
would make me feel
Important
You thought all the boys (and men)
Was good for my ego
They see You as this glorious
Phenomenal work of art
But they never see me*

After the traditional teacher compliment about the improvements she showed in the revisions of her list poem, we talked about how no matter what those boys and men saw and wanted, it was still her butt and part of her body. I told her she needed to “take ownership of your butt back from those men, so that you do not have to think of your butt as separate from “you” and as stealing the attention from your face and who you are inside.”

“How can I own it?” she asked.

I told her, “By accepting that it is yours and beautiful, not some ‘mutated ball of muscle’ as you defined it in the poem”.

I continued, “You can’t change the way they look at you, but you can change the way you look at them and the way you look at yourself.” I argued that just accepting that guys wanted her and that she had a great body would help her move on. In essence, she needed to alter her image of herself from nasty and inadequate to beautiful. She could just dismiss all the guys that came up to her and complimented her body because she knew what they wanted. She could now wait until someone came along and wanted to know who “she” was, and actually tried to see her person as the work of art, not just her body as the object. But if she didn’t accept all that she was, butt and all, how could she expect men to accept her for all she was? She had to be the first one to love all of her.

The anger she felt had to be redirected to the men and not to herself and her body. In essence, she and her body had done nothing wrong and were not nasty, it was the boys and men who had the problem. (She and I kept saying men because of her poem that said,

Sadly
At 15
My "Big Girl" mind, body, words and walk
Confuse grown men.

My intent was to get her to see the whole truth. Instead of directing the anger at herself and her body, I tried to get her to begin to think critically about where her anger should be directed. The anger she should have felt toward her friends' fathers, was instead directed toward herself. In a short letter she wrote, "There must be something wrong with me because they don't harass other girls, the pretty girls. So it's okay for old men to see if they could have sex with me because I'm "abnormal" but you're crazy if you do it to another girl who's exactly my age? What is so abnormal about me? I have two eyes, ten fingers, a nose and a mouth just like everyone else. 'From the back you look old', they always tell me."

Clearly, Jasmine was made to believe she was not normal. She began to see herself the same way men were seeing her, which was as a sex object. Because she did not have a positive self image to build from, she was unable to define herself and resist their negative views of her. Instead, their sexual desires for her taught her that she did have a value. It was to give men what they could not get from the pretty girls, who they respected. I simply asked her who had the power to define her as pretty or normal? She said, "They do" and I retorted with, "No, you do". She asked, "How, when I see pretty girls all the time?" This implied that within her own stratification of beauty she was not

in the pretty category, which seemed to anger her. I told her that the anger she felt could also not be directed at other girls (often the light skinned pretty girl was the target of her jealousy). She needed to begin the process of defining herself as beautiful too.

The way she coped with this anger at first was to reject the notion that she was someone to be loved by herself or anyone else. Having gone from no male attention to too much male attention (now geared toward sex), she felt the pressure to make them happy. She had a power that the pretty girls did not, which was that she was valued as a sexual commodity because of her body shape. We talked about how that wasn't really power, and she explained how badly she really saw herself. The next section examines the most negative self image Jasmine adopted for herself.

Every Queen isn't royalty

Jasmine was made to feel terrible about her body because she could not see why her body was beautiful, and attributed the attention from men paid to her body as another mark against her as a person. She believed her body was just a shell that men wanted to have sex with, which kept men away from wanting to discover her as a person. Jasmine chose to turn her objectification into a role of power. This section examines that role and the troubling nature of her source of power. It got to the point where she began to see herself as a mere sex object, so she called herself the 'wet dream queen'. This image of herself was by far the most negative and represents the height of her self-loathing. Here is her description of this negative self-image she gave herself.

She wrote in her journal, "I visit many boys in their sleep where they fuck me so good that I scream their name, when my butt fat jiggles against their little wee-wees and cum all over their sheets. They like to brag to their friends about how good I was and forget to tell them that it was all a dream. I, the Wet Dream Queen, satisfy every boy's fantasy but disappoint them in reality. The girl with the Phat Ass is easy and she should let you have sex with her. As long as she wasn't absolutely beautiful in the face, you

should get 'dem draws the first time around. That "law" applied to me when boys used to have the audacity to request sex from me."

This view of herself as the wet dream queen really bothered and sickened me. In the one-on one-dialogue that followed, I told her that the only potential power in this role was as an object of desire, which she could deny to men and thus have some element of control over them. I talked to her about how this role was also a non human role. A sex object is not a human being. She could not settle on this vision of herself either. Ugly was bad, but beauty and power through sex was even worse. If sex was the way she would be valued, then why not give it to them so they would love her. As she reflected on my words that day in the corner of the computer lab, she said they "made sense" because this flawed theory of hers only lead to more pain and self-loathing as she looked into her past. She wrote about the emptiness she felt after giving in to some boys, and worse, actually thinking they loved her and finding out they were lying to her. She did not see much value in herself as shown in this excerpt from her journal she brought to me the next day.

"I'm nothing." I yelled. "All these years, I've been only good for one thing. Again and again, I keep falling into this endless pit. And there's nothing that keeps me from getting trapped into their stupid games."

My role as a loving teacher developed from these dialogues about her poetry. I tried my best to help her think about what she was doing and why she was doing it. I was trying not to judge her, rather help her think and formulate her own values and conclusions after our discussions. The "nothing that keeps me from getting trapped" soon became me in many ways, but I was trying to transfer that responsibility and power onto her shoulders. I tried to be there for her, and wrote comments in the margins of her poems telling her she did not have to give in and be nothing. I knew that I was not a permanent solution, but I had to try to help her find a solution within herself. My

comments on her poetry often led to follow up conversations as we dialogued about her poems. I asked her what part she played in these bad encounters with men after reading a poem in which she bashed a boy who lied to her about loving and being faithful to her. I wanted to know, if she did not trust them, why she would sleep with them.

She said, "I just let them do it."

"Why?"

"It is just sex, it doesn't mean anything to me." she answered.

"Giving your body doesn't mean anything?"

"No, it is just a physical act that boys want and it feels good for us sometimes, too."

"You are so wrong. Tell me what are you worth?"

"A lot."

"Really, then why are you giving yourself away to boys who do not value you and realize you are worth a lot?" I said, as she pondered the question and began to cry.

I basically told her that I was not trying to make her feel bad, or cheap, but it didn't seem like she really believe she was worth a lot. I remember telling her she was special and not a wet dream queen. I argued that she needed to treat herself with love and respect, and if sex is just an act and what men want, then shouldn't the price they pay be much higher? Is asking them to take the time to get to know her, and realize she was valuable too much? I wanted her to focus on thinking things through for her future, not on feeling bad about her past. I believed I was showing love because even though I was disappointed in her, I was still there with her helping her think through her choices. The emphasis need not be place on my personal feelings or value system, but on her development.

Jasmine was crying and trying to wipe her eyes, not from shame because other students had cried in the computer lab while talking to me, but from the shame of

realizing she was not respecting, valuing, and loving herself. I was getting tired of telling her that you she worth a lot and had brains, beauty, and talent. If she wasn't going to believe me, should I stop pestering her? I wanted her to begin to think about the importance of these conversations, which might end after our time in class together. I admit that I was laying a slight guilt trip on her, but I believed she did have the power to believe in herself or "achieve 20/20 vision and nirvana" as she later acknowledged herself in her letter responding to my dialogic letter to the class. Her response when I asked her if I should give up on her was "Please don't give up on me. I believe you, but I just forget to believe it when I am alone."

We talked more about how to ignore those men who only wanted sex when she was alone, and the key was never giving in because in her heart she had to know she was worth more than just sex. In fact, the concept of making love needed to actually apply before she even considered being with another boy. We dialogued about what love was and how she could tell when they really loved her and when it was a lie to get sex. I gave her a simple test, which was he had to know her well enough to understand the gift he was getting. No one can love you if they don't really know who you are. She really liked that definition of love because she realized that those boys did not really love her because they did not know her. "In many ways then, they did not really hurt the real me either," she said. I think this comment helped her rationalize and heal a little from her bad experiences. My intent was not to tell her to go out and make love, rather to give her a way to avoid having sex. I knew that it would be very hard for a boy to get to know the real Jasmine and if she just had the will to hold them and herself to this new standard, then she would not give her body to anyone else. Just telling her not to have sex any

more would not have worked because if she had listened, then I would have had the power, when I wanted her to have the power. More than likely she would have just ignored me because she had heard the ‘just say no to sex’ speech at home, at school, and at church and it was not a realistic statement in her social surroundings in her high school where numerous girls were pregnant and who was having sex with whom was part of Jasmine’s lunch conversations.

Over the semester, she was tested repeatedly by boys, but she stayed strong. She made it a point to come and tell me whenever she was able to resist. She wrote,

“There are dogs chasing me; nipping at my heels begging for a bone. Sometimes I want to just throw it at them thinking then they will leave me alone. But I can’t let that weak side of me show anymore.”

I told her, “I am proud of you and keep up the good work.” When I saw her in the hallway between classes talking to boys she often excused herself from them to say, “He’s just a friend”. I told her she didn’t need to please me, she just needed to please herself. I didn’t want to play the father role with her, I was her teacher, which meant the power and control needed to be passed to her rather than inherently given to me as the male authority figure. Her realization of her weakness sustained her and kept her strong until she swore she was in love around prom season. Her poetry also became more self affirming during this time period. She was not giving herself to men and feeling bad about it, so she had time to begin to feel better about herself. Not feeling bad all the time made her feel proud of herself because she had assumed control over her body.

Jasmine adopts a new self image

In order to show the impact of the dialogic process in letter writing and the class more generally, I now turn to a discussion of the image of self that Jasmine adopted at the end of our class. Her image of self was expressed in her poetry and will be analyzed in this section to establish a change in her self-image.

“This Is Me”

*am a sorceress
With my warrior shield
Triumphing over all my battles
I am the temptress
A palm tree
Holding the exotic berries
You yearn
I am a Goddess
Respected and feared
Powerful and untouched
Like unburning fire
I am the Queen of Mystery
Princess of Desire
Your first love
The morning star
Simply beautiful
I am an eagle Sole and defensive
Intricate and rare I am a precious jewel
A diamond in the ruff
A masterpiece Phenomenal*

I shouldn't have to point out how powerful it is that a girl who wrote about being an ugly duckling a few months before had grown to now see herself as an eagle. She even skipped past the stereotypical image of beauty in the swan. She was not the typical objectified beauty anymore in her mind. She saw herself as an eagle - a predator bird, not a bird preyed on like the duckling she identified with earlier. She also knew that being a rare and beautiful bird meant she would be alone and needed to be defensive because she was still a target for those looking for a trophy. She was no longer calling herself

“nothing” in her poems, but associated herself with powerful celestial and spiritual images. Though she still saw herself as a source of desire in this poem, the refreshing change was that she wasn’t touched. There was now a distance she established between herself and men. They seemed to have to first know these rare traits she possessed before she could be their love. She had accepted that men would yearn for her, but also now commanded respect and reverence. Her self-image of the beautiful goddess was much more powerful than the ugly duckling, or just the sexy girl in school. She seemed to have elevated herself in this poem, as she was working to elevate her self-image in life. During this process I tried not to impose an image on Jasmine, rather I tried to help her see the destructive nature of the images she had of herself. I did tell her she was beautiful, but she had the sole power to adopt that image of herself. As she stated, I was only a lens she could look through. She alone had the power to decide what vision of herself she would accept, and which negative image she no longer chose to accept. In fact, Jasmine said it best herself, when she wrote about the power of poetry and her pen in her life in one of her poems.

*I drain it all into my pen,
my savior,
my weapon,
my source of power*

These poems Jasmine wrote *were* her savior. She used her poetry as a weapon to attack and destroy a negative self image, then write herself and adopt a more powerful image. My expressions of love and our dialogues provided her with a way to tap into her own power and use it to her advantage. I was constantly on the lookout for lines in her poetry that seemed disempowering or presented a weak view of self and pointed them out to her for her to think about and then write about, which helped her adjust her views of

herself. This work required both of us to maintain a course-long vigilance. It was this vigilance and the series of conversations that helped her to see herself in different ways. My caring about her and offering my love allowed a dialogic space for critical understanding to take place. It is important to note that I did not approve of her negative self-images or the way she chose to give herself to boys, but I did not judge her. I was instead with her and there for her. My role was to push her in her thinking about her actions and beliefs, so that she could judge them and learn to grow from them. She showed me this growth when she wrote these lines, while standing in front of a mirror:

“I opened my eyes and saw me for the first time. The identical face began to look familiar to me. She smiled and I noticed I was smiling with her. I can love myself, I thought.”

This is a fitting quote to end this chapter because it is not the feel good story end that ties everything nicely and neatly like a romance novel would. Jasmine didn't say she does love herself, she said she thinks she can. Her words are the language of possibility. They speak to realistic potential, which may be all I can ask for as a teacher. The process of her coming to know and love herself is still ongoing in her life outside of our class. The class ended, but she is still out there struggling in society. Because we formed a loving relationship, I believe she will continue to call on me from time to time, as she has already done this summer by emailing me some poetry. One of the most inspiring was a poem she wrote playing with the 'music to my ears' cliché. The music to her ears was the sounds of nothingness. In the poem, she argues that *no sound* is music to her ears because all of the negative sounds have stopped. Her list of negative sounds had included despair, self-loathing, self-hiding, fake lovers, and other foolish mistakes she had made. I loved that she had proactively swept the negative landscape clean, ending the background noise in her life that was distracting her from loving herself, and had found harmony

within herself. I emailed her back, but also met her for lunch to dialogue about her poetry. A teacher-student relationship doesn't end when the class ends, not unless there was no true human-to-human caring and connecting relationship in the first place.

Conclusion

From working through the dialogic process with Jasmine, I learned that critical literacy, dialogue, and expressions of love are not concepts I can just apply in the classroom as objective lessons that have a nice end point; they are processes that need to be articulated more clearly such as I have portrayed in this study so that others may try to implement them effectively in other writing classrooms. I learned that love and dialogue are lived experiences that become the catalyst for teacher and student growth in the classroom. I can never forget to respect the necessity of forming personal relationships with students through dialogue for true critical understanding of self to take place. In the same vein, caring for, respecting, and loving students does not constitute a romantic notion, an ideal end that I can just adopt in a short period of time. It is a long process, one which requires a personal investment and enough time with students to understand their views of themselves. Love and dialogue are not ends; they are means to promote human growth and change.

When I think about the exchange in this chapter about loving self and using the dialogic letter and love to help students critically reflect on their self-images, understand their images, and decide whether or not they want to adjust those images toward a more powerful and human image, I am left wondering if I can expand this process to all of my students in the future. While I had the luxury of reading their personal poetry and made space in my classroom for rich written and spoken dialogue, our current educational

system may not be conducive to learning about and coming to love our students. Though smaller class size is a constant plea in this standards-based curriculum era, I don't think that smaller classes alone will matter much, if teachers do not take the time in these smaller classes to form loving relationships with their students through dialogue and expression of love. I do want to expand my practice into my English classes, but I must try to find time within the curriculum, within the text, and within the writing to learn about one hundred and forty students as opposed to just fifteen. Further research must be done on multiple classes to find ways to express love and engage in meaningful dialogue with larger numbers of students so that both teacher and student can grow as humans. As a teacher, I should not be placed in the dehumanizing position of having to pick and choose which students I can build relationships and dialogue with, due to time constraints and the oversized class dilemma in public education. As a teacher, I should not have to face the dehumanizing choice of picking some students to come to know and love, over others, due to time constraints.

CHAPTER VI

Creating opportunities for empowerment as a dimension of Humanizing pedagogy

Introduction

This chapter discusses how I tried to create opportunities for student empowerment. My goal was to help my students, struggling with poor self-images, begin to re-examine themselves. As noted earlier, my perspective of empowerment is grounded in the work of Freire¹²⁵, and my understanding of my particular teaching context, and the lives of my students. The bulk of the chapter is an analysis of the role my comments on students' written poetry facilitated students' access to empowerment. Student poetry and the comments written in response to their work are central to this chapter. My goals are twofold: first, to show how disempowering images, beliefs, and ideas generated within student poetry serve as a basis to promote critical reflection, dialogue, and potential for growth and change, and secondly to show how posing questions to students and having them see alternative possibilities or realities, and hope aid in the empowerment process. After an in-depth look into the empowerment process with one student, Desi, the chapter turns to a discussion of empowerment opportunities within the whole class setting. Analysis is provided of an empowered student response to the censorship of their poetry.

¹²⁵ Freire 1989.

Then, I move to an analysis of the use of dialogue to create empowering opportunities, while students discuss a classmate's poem. The chapter concludes with an analysis of how students' comments about the poetry class and my approach to teaching the class were empowering for both the students and myself as their teacher.

Grounding Empowerment in my classroom

Empowerment means that students come to understand that they have control over their self image, they have the ability to redefine their self image, and they have the power to make changes in their lives despite their fears and prior beliefs that those changes were impossible. The empowerment process involved my students questioning their current beliefs with the help of their teacher, engaging in critical reflection about their views of themselves and the world through dialogue, and gradually accepting possibilities and their own power, which was revealed through their poetry and direct assertions about themselves. My role as a teacher was vital to this process, because if empowerment were so easy to come by and completely an individual pursuit, then my students would have already done this, as would everyone else who felt disempowered. My role in this process was to create opportunities for empowerment to take place through pedagogy, more specifically through my attempts to challenge disempowering beliefs, images, and solutions, as well as my attempts to engage students into taking ownership of their empowerment process.

Using Poetry for Empowerment

This section focuses on creating opportunities for empowerment through carefully crafted comments on my students' written poetry. After explaining the process I used for commenting on student poetry, this section focuses on a group of student poems that reflected a similar notion of disempowerment: the power for change did not reside within them. After each poem, I offer an analysis of my comments written in response to their poetry, demonstrating how my questions were meant to create opportunities for empowerment by offering new possibilities to each student.

Protocol for commenting on student poetry to promote empowerment

Across the year, with each student poem I read, I first made comments on the poem in terms of improving the artistic merit of the poem. These comments on poetic elements, editing, and other issues of craft were geared toward helping the student improve the poem as a work of art. After reading the poem once and offering all I could as a creative writing teacher, I then read the poem again as a teacher concerned with issues of empowerment, and student negative self-images. If I did not see anything in the poem that I could use to help push them in their thinking about self, and then I made no further comments on the poem because I was not trying to give them a self-image, I was only trying to challenge them to think critically about their own. However, if I did see an image in the poem that I viewed as disempowering, I made comments that I would not have made in a regular writing class with a single focus on good writing. This active search for disempowering images and my refusal to let them go unchallenged were at the core of this pedagogy, and not just occasional occurrences in the class. These comments in many ways became a way to address student negative self images as well as issues of empowerment. The difficulty of this process was finding a way to challenge the

disempowering notion without crushing the student which would also have been disempowering. I wanted to offer a possible bridge from the disempowering image to a more powerful image, and to connect the student's disempowering images in their poetry to my efforts to help them think critically about their self image. My comments to Jasmine about her poem called "Breathe", meant to challenge the helpless image she presented of herself, provide the first example of this empowerment process.

Breathe

I cannot breathe → my face is turning blue

All this
Stupidly, love and frustration
Ignorance, naiveté and remorse
Is choking me

Blocking up my lungs

I'm suffocating on my own toxic fumes → I cannot get enough air. redundant.

A breeze would be so nice

Blowing gently across my wet cheeks

Inhaling a sweet aroma of a painless life

Exhaling Blowing away all the drama and bad karma

Making me float above my misery

Releasing my strife that clogs my respiration system.

~~Still~~

It's hard to breathe

Waiting for that breeze is making me suffocate in my own toxic fumes

My face is turning blue

You are going to have to trim your lists. Pick one! Which is this poem about?

In both poems
the speaker is waiting
for someone or something else
to save her from her misery.

Why can't she save herself?
Why can't she make herself smile?
Be her own breeze?

Refuse to choke on the things she
lists as her toxic fumes?
Why can't she do this? Explain in
a poem!

Challenging Students' Disempowering Self-Images

I saw my responses to this poem as an opportunity to engage Jasmine in critical thought because this was the second poem in which she expressed similar ideas about escape (first poem not shown). After the editorial suggestions, I wrote questions at the bottom of her page to challenge her disempowering image of a girl passively waiting for change. I had to carefully reflect and craft these comments because my comments were no longer simple words or feedback on a student's writing; in a critical literacy moment, those comments were about life as well as her fragile identity. Having to come up with a way to push Jasmine in her critical thinking about self, forced me to become a more reflective teacher. This was an instance where responding to student work forced me to enlarge my role as a teacher who reads, understands, and relates to student work. I had to show her my humanness. I had to show her that I am a teacher who cared about her well-being.

A steadfast rule in poetry is 'not to assume' that Jasmine, the poet, is the speaker in the poem, just because she used the personal "I." I was fairly confident in breaking that rule in this case (as well as in the upcoming poems) because I had heard my students express these concerns in class, and Jasmine said "I was so fed up with everything when I wrote this." I also knew that with her real life self-image at stake, it would be worth it to violate a rule I would have followed in a traditional poetry workshop. Though I assumed Jasmine was talking about herself, I still crafted my comments within a framework of responding to "the speaker" in the poem as opposed to just writing "you". I believed that this approach might help Jasmine gain critical distance from her situation by looking at herself as a third person. I hoped that when she saw how I challenged the speaker's self-

image, she might be more open to my idea rather than take my comments as a personal attack, which could be viewed as pointing out her weaknesses. By underlining the speaker, and the word ‘her,’ I was signaling to Jasmine that I did know the poem was really about her and I did want her to think about improving her own life.

Despite my softer approach, I still directly addressed the disturbing image of a young girl who was waiting for some outside force to make her happy. To me, the problem was that waiting passively is a very disempowering stance for a young woman to take. She did not see the power for change as potentially in her grasp. Inside the poem itself, Jasmine recognized that her feeling of powerlessness was “choking” and “blocking up her lungs,” which in turn conjured up images of death. In essence, she seemed to argue in her poem that she could not go on in this state of pain, frustration, and feeling of powerlessness to change anything. “Waiting for the breeze” was the wish or prayer for release from this state. It seemed to me that she had been waiting a long time; otherwise there would have been no exigency for the poem itself. While the thought of the outside force is nice and refreshing, I wanted Jasmine to see that there are alternatives to escaping this state that don’t involve her waiting passively for an “other” to rescue her.

My written questions to her were meant to stimulate her mind about the alternate possibilities to the solution she posed in her poem. I believed that she needed an image that was different and more powerful than the disempowering damsel in distress image she had created for herself. Instead of telling her to save herself from misery as if I had the authority or power to command such things, I asked the series of “why can’t she” questions hoping Jasmine took them both literally and rhetorically. I wanted her to think about why she couldn’t be her own breeze/savior, and answer that rhetorical question

with 'of course I can be my own breeze'. The rhetorical point would be harder to achieve, so I kept driving the point home, almost trying to guilt her into seeing she could save herself. I did this by using her own words in her poem to challenge her. I loved her breeze metaphor, but I felt the concept of someone being their own breeze would be an awesome and empowering notion if she could apply it to herself. In my response, I also changed her making me choke on my own toxic fumes line to a "refusal" to choke on those fumes. I felt that the proactive refusal to choke was a much more powerful idea for someone who had the ability to see that the fumes could in fact choke you. If she was so wise to see the danger, then why not be even wiser and avoid the danger? The opportunity for empowerment existed for Jasmine because she had a choice to accept her disempowering stance or embrace and work towards a more powerful self-image. The empowerment process could begin with this belief in her own power and the image of self as savior could begin to stimulate change from her prior self-images, which were the self as unlovable or inadequate. Imagine the power of her no longer waiting passively for others to love her, call her beautiful, respect her, or tell her she was acceptable, and instead being her own breeze and defining herself, thus leading her to a more positive self-image. I believed that she had the potential to become empowered because she could give herself what she needed. I believed I was important in this process because I know I did not empower her, but I pointed out to her a way to begin to empower herself.

In order to encourage Jasmine to engage in reflective thinking, I requested that she write a poem explaining why she could not be her own breeze. I believed she first needed to confront her feelings of helplessness. If she wrote about her feelings, and voiced them on paper, then she could look at them and examine if those reasons were

valid. In many ways, I suspected that writing about why she couldn't be her own breeze might help her name her oppression, thereby providing her (actually us) with concrete things to think about and struggle against. Important in my discussion thus far is my identifying the fact that I could not force her to write the poem I wanted her to write, but I could make suggestions about issues that arose from her own work as she thought about writing new poems in the invention stage of the writing workshop. Luckily, she responded positively to my suggestions, and in time she wrote other poems and letter to me about being her own breeze and loving her self. The empowerment process that I describe in this section and the next is developed from the questions and suggestions I offered to students to promote their thought and growth. I have come to understand that a vital piece of the empowerment then seems to be the ability of a teacher to help students see the possibility of a more powerful self. Once students can see possibilities and hope students have the choice to adopt a more powerful stance.

Challenging Students' Disempowering Problem Solving

My students had numerous self-image problems and they also had ways to solve those image problems that were disempowering. The students' solutions to various problems they faced in their lives are examined in this section. I firmly believe that the choice to escape a problem is in many ways a disempowering choice. First, the choice to escape could suggest that the individual does not have the power or capacity to solve their dilemma themselves. I believe that many of my students viewed their problems as too powerful for them to manage, so they chose escape first. Escape, as a last resort, much like an attempted escape from slavery is one thing, but escape becomes disempowering when it is a first option known as avoidance. Escape can also be

disempowering because so often my students did not really escape their problem at all. The problem remained their strategy of avoidance, seemed to intensify the problem and, simply further depressed them. Finally, escape can be disempowering because it was so often the easy way out for my students. They chose to opt out of the hard work, critical thought, and problem-solving they would need to employ to solve their problem. Fear, doubt in their abilities, and pessimism about the possibility of change allowed my students to forget about their own power and agency and escape.

There were several examples of poems my students wrote expressing the disempowering form of escapism that I described above. In Ayo's poem "Life", the speaker wanted to escape into the stars to avoid the reality of death, pain, and violence he had witnessed over the past eighteen years. Rather than re-typing the poems and comments, I scanned them so that the teacher student exchange could be seen clearly.

Life

Sometimes I wish that
I could get away from it all
I wish that I could fly away and
Chill with the stars
Cause life's hard
You never know who to trust
~~Us young people of today~~
Don't know love from lust
If in God we trust
Why do people lie?
Why every other day another
Baby die?
Why every other night another
brother cry?
Tears of pain
Fall from many grown ^{men's} ~~man~~ eyes
Life is not a game
It's a harsh reality

2 questions.

1. What would this
young brother do while
he was chilling in the
stars away from life?
Where is that poem?

2. Since we know
he can't really escape,
then where is the poem
about how this young
brother is dealing
and coping with life that
is so hard?

Aside from the editorial additions of question marks and other grammatical issues, Ayo's poem was not a great candidate for revision because of its simplicity and

structural rhyme scheme. Instead of worrying about this becoming a ‘great poem’, I thought he, like Jasmine in her “Breathe” poem earlier, needed to think about another possible reality. The first question I asked was what would this young brother do while he was chilling in the stars ways from life. My intention here was to show him I understood his speaker’s need to escape by indulging his fantasy of escaping this harsh reality. I honestly was also curious about what a young black male would paint as the new reality in the stars. What did he see as a better world? I wanted to let him know I was interested in his views on what society needed to improve. His poem stopped short of full social critique, and I needed him to know it was okay for him to go ahead and revise the world with his pen. I viewed rewriting the world as an opportunity for empowerment because if he could articulate what he wanted, then he might be able to focus his energies on achieving his goals in life instead of merely complaining about the status quo. I also knew that too many people trying to escape a reality will do very little to alter that reality. I wanted to put the burden on his shoulders to begin to explain how a black man is able to cope with a harsh reality, where there is very little time for him to play games (yes, even the athletic games that society and schools have decided are the best ways to motivate and give false hope to struggling black boys). Since he had been able to cope thus far without resorting to the violence he alluded to in his poem, I hoped that his next poem about how to survive these conditions might provide inspiration for other young black males looking for answers. If he wrote, then maybe they wouldn’t have to dream about a solution in the stars, or worse, take substances to get them closer to that starry world that was so much better than the one they were currently living in. The

race issue was a big deal; at the same time, Ayo's need for flight seemed to transcend race and became a teenage answer to teenage troubles.

Just like Ayo's poem, Amy's poem "To fly," seemed to represent escapism. In her poem, she fantasized about soaring high "away from everything, leaving behind your worries and your troubles". She could then "see the world in a new light" and experience "a smile of complete happiness". In my response to her poem, I asked her if it was really possible to just fly away from the troubles, and what were the other possibilities to just escaping for a while. I wanted her to begin to think about other means to deal with her troubles besides a temporary flight away. To me, her solution was a disempowering solution because at its center was the idea that the problem couldn't be solved or conquered. As students, they seemed to believe they were too weak to deal with the problems they faced in their lives, and so running away was the next best thing because temporary peace was better than no peace at all. I wanted them to begin to contemplate a long-term peace. If they had the desire for a more permanent peace, then I would argue I had created yet another opportunity for empowerment, because they would be drawn back into their lives in an attempt to correct, not escape, their troubles.

Jesse's attempt at a temporary flight was much more dangerous than Ayo's stars, or Amy's soaring. He wrote about the escape too many high school students have been selecting: the escape into drugs and alcohol.

To get away

All I need to get away
Is this bottle of E & J
Just one last hit of this
J
To elevate my mind
To get it off of things for
A little while
The liquor makes
It easier to cover up
My mistakes
Blaming it only on
The 12 pack I just
Threw back
Not accepting the blame as my
Own
It helps me to get away

↓
The irony is you
don't get away??
Why can't He speaker
Just deal with the
things on his mind,
Try that form of
escape for
once?

The alcohol and marijuana were clearly tools to just get his mind “off of things for a little while.” I decided, since he knew these tools were only a temporary escape, to offer him what he clearly wanted, which was a permanent escape. I challenged him to actually deal with the things such as the mistakes, and the poor choices, which would

require him stepping up as a man and taking the responsibility for both of them. Maybe if he could see his agency in those mistakes and poor choices, he could eventually see that he then had the power within himself to correct them. As long as the power lay in a bottle, joint, or six minutes of wrestling (another temporary escape he wrote about), he was not seeing his power as an individual. The empowering opportunity was for him to own his mistakes instead of escaping them as a means to see his agency in his life. Once he had the courage to own them, he might also soon discover he had the power and courage to correct the mistakes. In my conversations with Jesse, we talked about how he could own his mistakes by accepting the fact that his poor grades were what made him ineligible to wrestle, which took away one escape mechanism and gave him an excuse to try illegal escapes. We talked about how he could meet with teachers and improve his grades. But I also told him that I thought that wrestling was a short-term solution. I asked him why just think of being eligible for sports and not eligible for life? Why think about happiness in terms of minutes instead of years?

It was those questions which truly stumped Jesse, because he simply said he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life, and had no plans, let alone knew what would make him happy for an extended period of time. I gave him the writing assignment to begin to think about and write about what a 'good life' would be like for him beyond high school. The process of empowerment had begun for Jesse as he was attempting to understand himself and figure out a direction for his life. During this process, he had little time to see himself as useless (his negative self image) because he was the only one who had the power to define what he wanted. He might have seen himself as useful now because he was figuring out what mattered to him, which no one

else could do. The empowerment process seemed to go hand-in-hand with the improvement of his self-image.

Unlike Jesse, Mark took the blame for his mistakes, but again, according to him, there was little hope of finding answers within himself because he too believed he had no agency. In his “Captive in an Imperfect World” poem, he talked about a prison made up of “invisible bars, which hold (him) in place,” and how the bars are really “obstacles I put up for myself.” He bemoaned the long period he had spent in this “frozen solitude,” and knew that the bail to get out of prison was “my realization of what is wrong” which would free him from this life sentence. The line that troubled me was when he said, “I’ve been awaiting my conference with the answers”. I wrote to him, “If the problems were self made, then is looking outside the self for answers the way to go? Can anyone or any conference provide these answers, or is it up to the speaker?” I wanted Mark to question this disempowering notion that he had to sit and wait for answers to come to him, which left him helpless and imprisoned. I wanted him to conceptualize the possibility of having the power within himself to break out of his mental jail. I asked the question to get him thinking about what he could do to end this state of confusion and confinement. I wanted Mark to begin to see himself not only as his own jailer, and victim, but maybe for the first time as his own emancipator. I was so glad to see his revision of the poem because he actually removed the line about awaiting a conference with the answers. Without that line, the poem became a struggle within him to find the inner strength to dig him self out of the holes he had put himself in. The poem, without that one line he chose to erase, was an acknowledgment of the power within him to free him self from self-imposed prisons. Mark unfortunately had the power to imprison himself, but understood now that he also

had the power to free himself; it was now a matter of time, not an “other” doing it for him.

Desi’s escape poem, written after Jasmine’s “breathe” poem, was the most complex. Below is an excerpt from the end of her untitled poem. Her version of escape involved shutting herself off from the world and watching the rest of us come to realize that life is a waste of time. Below is her untitled poem.

*I'd like to sit in an enclosed box
Made of glass
That isn't see through
That no shine can pass through
That no one can tap
That no one can break.
And I'd watch you
You happy people
And I'd laugh at all the mistakes
That you will make
Until you come to the single conclusion that I have:*

*You will be born. You will hurt
You will be seventeen
And you write crappy, negative poetry,
And then you will die.*

I responded to the poem by asking her if the box was an avoidance mechanism to escape the mistakes that occur from age seventeen to death and she said “yes”. I also asked her if she understood “that there was life after seventeen. If so, then are you going to live life and risk mistakes, or hide in the box? If you are going to stay in the box, then have you lived life to the fullest and achieved all you needed to these last seventeen years? If you haven’t done everything you ever wanted, then can’t eighteen-death be seen as a second chance rather than an inevitable waste of time?”

I wanted Desi to see that hiding in a box was quite disempowering. What she seemed most certain of was that after the pain and hurt of the first seventeen years, all people did was die (but they did fall into a routine upon giving up on their dreams of happiness after seventeen, which she explained to me during our talk about this poem). I had to begin to open her up to the possibility that there was something worth living for after seventeen. I had to question Desi's understanding of the world, so that she in turn could begin to question her fatalistic notion of life. I saw my role as first, being willing to believe her vision of the world, which I felt showed her that I was listening to her and understood her perspective.

My next role was to show Desi how if I tried to see the world her way, there might be potential problems, which is what I began to question. The biggest question was why do you have to escape to the box from 17 until death? Was there really no point in trying the world out again? Or was it possible that she was just afraid to risk getting hurt again? Was the world all bad, or was her experience just bad? Did she have the courage to step outside of her box and test her own theory? In essence, come out and prove that she would be hurt again. To help give her courage to come out of the box, I decided to challenge her notion of death. If those first seventeen years were not the best, and she had not lived them to the fullest, then that death might be welcomed. However, the notion of the after-life and reincarnation seemed to be important philosophies for her to consider. What if the next sixty to seventy years after adolescence were a new life? What if she could come out of the box and live a new happy life before a physical death. I wanted Desi to begin to contemplate a world worth living in, because if she couldn't even conceive it, then how could I expect her over the course of this semester to actually

begin to believe it and come out of her little box? I wanted to get to know the real Desi, not this glassed-in self she was presenting. I knew it would be tough, but I would not give up on trying to coax her out of the box, and helping the others see the potential for a change to be within their grasp as opposed to a far off dream outside of their reality. I felt as though I had a moral obligation to continue to engage her in this type of thinking. A perfect example of my refusal to give up on her was when she began to write about school and teachers. She wrote a poem with the lines “so I sat in class, and silently laughed, at the false textbooks.” I asked her to simply extend this school critique to her other classes and textbooks, so I could understand better why she believed the textbooks were false. She took my challenge and wrote a two page prose poem criticizing each teacher she had, so I will not show the entire poem. However, after the critique, she ended with a clearer explanation.

annoying, and I wish he'd teach us psychology and not text from a book. I wish someone would just speak the truth, and not give us false statements like these teachers are.

We're all going to graduate,
Go to college
Get married
Have a "life",
And then we'll die.
Why are they all trying to deny this?

1. Is that the life you want??

2. Even if, your life ends up following this pattern, isn't there something to be said about quality of life??

3. Your list of what life entails

is so limited. Aren't there other

things in life like fun, success, the things

you value??

4. I think the most insightful thing you said

was the part about knowing about other possibilities

but being afraid to say NO!! what is so scary

about just saying NO? (new poem maybe)

5. How long are you going to continue the "fake" path, but not have the courage to set your own??

7. maybe the reason you think nothing matters is simply because you want choice to do the things that do matter to you.

Again, my response to Desi's poem was geared toward helping her see that even in a false world, the individual still has power. I knew this was a better approach than trying to justify the school system to a skeptical student, because then she would have seen me as part of the establishment. I just allowed her to have her say and voice her views about school. I then asked Desi when she was going to set her own path that was not fake. In my mind that was a true opportunity for empowerment because she would

have to follow through on her vision of the world or continue to live in powerless misery. She had an image of herself as weak, but found power in it by refusing to try to change anything. Her choice to remain weak reflected her power of choice, but I wanted her to see other choices that were more empowering. I believed I had to try and help Desi evolve from just another teenager complaining about school to a potential change agent for herself and potentially for school reform. She had to see that there were alternatives to the set pattern of life she despised, and that the only thing stopping her was her fear of setting her own path. I had to help her see that just complaining and enjoying the power of the cynic was not the most powerful role available to her. Once Desi saw other possibilities; she might be able to move toward change.

Challenging Student's Disempowering Beliefs

Desi's fatalistic views about the world and life coincided with her beliefs about herself. In this lengthy conversation we had during a private talk in the computer lab while other students were typing their poems, she articulated with conviction that the reason she alienated herself from others was because she did not see herself as worthy of attention from the world or attention from herself. The beliefs she had about herself and her self-worth were disempowering because she just erased the possibility of herself mattering in the world. She then argued that she had no real chance at happiness because this concept didn't exist for her. I saw this view as disempowering because without the possibility of something better, the individual has nothing to strive for. Below, I include the entire discussion to provide readers with a closer sense of how Desi viewed herself and her world. I strongly believe that Desi needs to be heard because she wasn't being heard in life and had internalized this rejection by believing she wasn't worthy of being

heard. Hearing her words was important to me in the moment of teaching, but they are also important for readers and teachers to hear to better understand the empowerment process. I also told Desi I would be using her words in the study so that others could hear her voice. The excerpt also demonstrates my efforts to remove and challenge these disempowering beliefs, while simultaneously bonding with Desi through dialogue. This conversation took place in response to a poem that she said she did not care about. Without reading the poem, I asked her why she would turn in something that she didn't care about and she said because "I don't care about anything."

"What don't you care about? I asked.

"My parents. I stay away from them."

"Why?"

"Well, I stay away from everyone."

"Why?"

"It gives me comfort."

"Can't those be the lines of a poem instead of this poem?"

"No. That would just be mindless drivel. I would sound like the stereotypical high school kid who dresses in all black."

Here, I wanted Desi to define the stereotypical teenager because that was a image that I wanted her to avoid as well after hearing her complaints about school. My attempts to get her to define mindless, and stereotypical, high school students were fruitless and showered with 'I don't knows'. So I turned the discussion back to her parents because that was the only subject she seemed sure about.

"My parents don't get me. They think I am a loser, that I am not going anywhere in life and that I am unorganized. They don't know me. I am not the negative type of unorganized, I am organized for reasons."

"Well, who are you? Who is the you that they don't see?" These questions were essential to ask in my mind because if she bought into the loser image she believed her

parents held of her, then she might begin to develop a loser mentality, which was disempowering because she might simply refuse to try since she would lose anyway. I tried to get her to perform the more empowering task of defining herself and coming to know who she was. I believed that if she could do this, then she might have the power to ignore the negative images the world might have of her, due to a strong base of a self affirmed definition of who she was. However, Desi quickly showed me that defining who you are is not an easy process.

“I don’t know? I am just out there.”

“Out where? Explain?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then how are your parents or anyone else for that matter supposed to know the real you?” (I wanted her to consider the real me idea because if she understood that this powerless, worthless creature she saw reflected from the mirror and her parents’ eyes was not her, then she no longer had to be bound by that lowly existence. If she was really someone else, then she had an escape from her situation. This time the escape would be real because she would escape by being and advocating for the person she really was rather than accepting the abuse and playing the role of the helpless teen.)

“They aren’t. I don’t want them to, plus I don’t know who the real me is.”

“Why don’t you want them to know?”

“My parents already rejected the person who isn’t me. So, I know they will reject the real me, too.”

“And the real me is?”

I tried again because she was so afraid that the real Desi would face the same rejection that the fake Desi she is at home had to face. She seemed to be protecting herself, her true self, from the pain and misery she believed were inevitable. The idea of her hiding who she was in fear that she would be rejected is not a very powerful position. I wanted her to articulate the real her and let the real Desi out. I think that maybe I was

asking too much at that point in time. This was still early in the course, and she did not trust teachers, adults, or parents, so why did I think she would trust me? Maybe her 'I do not know's' were her attempt to hide her true self from another potential threat. I would have to help Desi see that I was not a threat and had no intention of hurting the fake Desi or the real Desi if she ever felt comfortable enough with me to share herself with me. I would have to hope that showing her unconditional love and also who I was would help her gain the courage to accept this empowerment opportunity and enter her life as her true self. In essence, she had the power to be reborn. This was something she could only give to herself if the conditions were right, which was my job to help ensure.

In a conversation she and I had in the computer lab, she argued that she pushes people away who get too close to her by being mean to them. It was her way of testing people. I knew in many ways she was testing me and I hoped to pass by letting her know that no matter what she said or did, I would still want to know her. She argued that it was "worthless to get close to {her}". I asked her to write about this belief, but she just kept repeating the phrase "No, it would be too icky."

I argued that the point in figuring you out is so that you can find out the things that make you happy, and the things you want to do, so that you can find out the things you have to do in life in order to get to do the things you want to do. In this instance, I had to offer a direct challenge to her disempowering view that we will all end up miserable, thus it was pointless to explore the self. I offered her a more powerful notion that we as humans had the ability to learn, revise, and make choices to bring ourselves happiness. I wanted to create an empowering opportunity for her by offering hope in the form of the individual as powerful enough to choose and acquire happiness. She honestly

was open to the notion that happiness might actually be a possibility. This openness might have been the first step in her empowerment process.

The problem was Desi said she was only happy two days out of seven, and she was not sure that it was possible to be happier than that because happiness may not be real, but an idea that we all chase. I argued that the pain, misery, and frustration she experienced may not be real either. The real issue boiled down to that Desi was making a choice between misery and happiness. She decided to choose misery, but I still wasn't sure why she made such a depressing choice. Her answer was simply "it was easier."

I wanted her to know that I sympathized with her, but that she could not just take the easy way out. We had gotten to the heart of the matter. It was easier not to deal with herself and her unhappiness; it was easier to wallow in the disempowering haze of misery. By encouraging her to write about herself in her poetry and allow her experiences to not only matter, but become important, I believed I was creating an opportunity for empowerment. Although I could not force her to write about and define herself, I could still offer her a safe place to do so if she wanted to. She could use this class to begin to define, to shape her version of happiness. She could begin to see herself differently and eventually have the confidence to let the world see her differently by revealing the real Desi. If she could begin this process, it would be empowering because it would be embracing her humanity, which would represent an overwhelming powerful achievement for someone who heretofore had seen herself as worthless. I then wrote to her on the back of one of her poems:

"Please write these poems about you, about no happiness, and about the easy choice of misery. You need to begin to think about the other side (happiness); write about it, about these thoughts you are having. Please. I will pay you any

amount of money to write about you and these feelings we have been talking about.”

Desi just stared at me and I back at her. My eyes were pleading, and her eyes were watering as her head began to shake back and forth and her lips mouthed ‘too icky’.

This conversation complicated the writing about self-concept for me. This young woman honestly didn’t think her “self” was worth writing about. She clearly had other issues of intimacy, unhappiness, and self esteem to work through along with her fatalistic view of life. I honestly wasn’t prepared for such an adverse and blunt rejection of the idea of writing about self. I hadn’t realized the extent to which low self-worth could rise as an obstacle in the exercise of self-exploration. I underestimated the depth of powerlessness she felt. If the I didn’t matter, then why in the world would the poet waste time writing about that I. Was I supposed to continue to push her into self-exploration? I know my gut was saying yes, but what if she never saw the point in looking at herself and never increased her sense of self-worth. Was I wrong or somehow doing the work of the oppressor if I forced her to look at a subject she inherently rejected (even though ironically it was a rejection of a self that wasn’t the ‘real’ her)? What if she agreed to take this journey into her self with me, and came to confirm her original belief that she wasn’t important enough to explore? What if she wrote bad poems and translated the bad poems as reinforcement of her lack of self-worth? Did I as a critical literacy educator have the right to push her into these areas? Despite the dangers, I was still feeling a gnawing in my gut to push her, because I knew the upside to be so powerful, too. What if she did find out that she was worth getting close to and that she too could be happy and loved? What if the poems did open her eyes to feelings of self-worth and she connected with her classmates? What if they did make her re-examine her choice of misery and the

easy way out? What if this student chose happiness for herself? I honestly couldn't live with myself if I didn't try to help her use poetry to address these issues and empower herself. What good was the belief that poetry could help these kids if I was afraid to push them toward this type of poetry in the invention stage of the writing workshop? The fear of letting one child dwell in darkness when I had a chance to help outweighed the potential dangers. After all, she was already miserable and saw no point in people getting close to her, so there was only so much more misery my attempts could bring her if they failed. I decided to interpret that conversation as another one of her tests. I was going to pass it by getting close to her anyway, like her friends did. I was going to try to pass her test by helping her break through and see that her happiness was possible.

Desi accepts the empowerment challenge

The very next day after our conversation, Desi brought in the following poem, which suggested she was willing to try to change her reality.

You're going to Montgomery college/but.
 No buts. We are your parents/but.
 We are your parents./I hate you
 Don't talk back to me you stupid fuck/but.
 I said shut up/but.
 You stupid slut/but.
 Bengali slang/but.
 Don't lock your door/~~but~~ why
 We are your parents/...
 We buy you presents/...
 We give you money/...
 And feed you plenty/...
 And on the outside you will be happy/...
 And on the inside ..
 We don't care..
 If you are dieing. /...
 We'll call you worthless/..
 And pathetic/..
 Pull your hair ~~and~~/..
 Don't ever talk back to me/..
 We're Bengali/..
 We can do this/..
 In our country/..
 We're allowed to/it's America.
And that's alright with us/it's not alright with me.
 I've cared long enough/... what me?
 I give up./on me?
 My head hurts.
 I'm going to sleep/What about me?
~~.....~~

Gold line?

ending →

The kid in this poem is forced into
 a painful, disempowering, oppressive silence.
 While that may be a reality at home, the beauty of this class
 is that it doesn't have to be that kid's reality here.
 Let that child speak her mind in the next poem.
 Allow her the freedom her parents have stolen, by letting
 her have her say in the world! No more... for her as you are the power
 of consent with your voice!

You paint a very powerful and
 disturbing picture! I am proud
 of your courage to write this piece

Thank you!

I first noticed the continued enforced silence in the first half of the poem signified
 by the child's "buts". The potential empowering elements of her poem came when the
 child finally said, "it's not alright with me". This poem, she told me, was a recap of the
 discussion she had had with her parents the night after we talked in class. The fact that
 she had had the courage to say she was not satisfied was important because she was

acknowledging to herself that she did want more out of life than a marriage and limited role as a woman. I wanted her to understand that the silence she experienced at home did not have to continue in this classroom and in her poetry. I encouraged her not to settle for disempowering silence, but rather, to speak and voice her opinions for the first time about her parents and her feelings about living in that environment. As a poet, she had the power to let the “daughter self” speak. She could give herself a voice and some sense of freedom. She could gather strength from the fact that it was her parents who had gone to sleep and given up after she had asserted herself. This was so much better than her usual routine, which had entailed going off to bed and crying herself to sleep. I told her I was proud of her because I really was. She not only had found the courage to speak out at home, but she had shown the courage to share her experience with her classmates and with me. Our interest in her poem also helped her see she was worth knowing because we were interested in the real life of the poet: Desi. She had the chance to see that she mattered to us, and perhaps she could herself begin to believe she mattered.

The last poem in her ‘parent’ series, written a few months later, illustrates her growth:

I.
 So last night
 I sat in front of my parents
 Or rather stood
 And yelled about college
 Yelled about life
 Yelled about abuse
 What I would call strife.
 And they actually listened
 My mother hugged me in the end
 And that surprised me.
 But should it?
 My parents giving a thought
 To what I want
 What I like
 And what I need
 Is surprising.
 Not only that
 It's scary.
 But last night,
 For the first time
 I can remember being happy
 Smiling, and letting my friends know
 That I somehow got through
 And that maybe I can stay home next year
 And keep my sanity.
 It felt amazing.

~~Amazing?~~ Amazing?

I tend to jump to conclusions like this
 See, I used to be a very positive person.

SO But then later that night,
 I laid in bed and thought about (these thoughts) *new phrase.*
 And I told myself to caution,
 To halt and take things as they come
 Too much hope, will blind me
 And too little hope
 Will leave me out in the cold.
 What's the balance?
 Be happy and forgive?
 Unhappy and push away?
 I'm still at a loss, even when I thought I gained something.

The journey this
 speaker has
 been through is
 inspiring:
 The benefits to
 voicing and
 respecting the worth
 of (you) "this speaker"
 seem to be powerful
 enough to continue
 this trend.

From the apprehensive nature of the last section, I knew not to fully believe things at home had changed. Therefore, I would need to encourage Desi to continue to let her voice be heard. I hinted that she might want to continue this trend if she enjoyed the powerful feelings self-expression brought her. The key to her happiness and sanity at home would come through the vocalization of her desires and what she wanted as an individual. I also believed that it was the writing of poetry that had driven her to action at home, and the writing of poetry which had helped her see her life more clearly and

realize a change was essential if she planned on surviving. Pushing her to examine herself and the disempowering lack of voice she had at home was an important role for me to play as the teacher. If I had just commented on the literary merits of the poem instead of making the pedagogical choice to challenge disempowering ideology, then when would Desi the person have gotten to grow and realize she mattered? No, when students are self-disclosing to a teacher and struggling with critical issues like image of self and feelings of powerlessness, fixing the poem is not enough. Students like Desi accepted the opportunity I provided and in return invited me into their worlds; as their teacher I had to accept the invitation and help them as best I could. The poetry my students were writing required more from me as a teacher. In many ways they were looking for an escape from their painful realities. My responses to the preceding poems about escape and powerlessness illustrate a teacher doing more than just fixing poems and commenting on their literary merit. Instead, they illustrate a teacher who also sees a need to help adolescents fix themselves and understand their own merits, and to offer as many opportunities as possible for them to become empowered.

Thus far, the empowerment process has been examined in the context of my relationship as a teacher with individual students. The next two sections of this chapter look at empowerment and poetry in group dynamics. The first group account is related to censorship and publication of student poetry, while the second is related to a class discussion about a student's poem.

Surviving Beyond Classroom Walls:

Empowerment and Publication of Student Poetry

This section discusses the ways in which I confronted traditional hurdles that students encounter in the publication process, which are potentially disempowering to writers. After discussing the various hurdles such as public acceptance, rejection letters, and the tendency to give up on writing, I provided my rationale for limiting the audience of their poetry as a way to manage these disempowering hurdles. My goal was to help my students have a chance at success through publication. This section then provides an in-depth discussion of an unanticipated hurdle: censorship in the school's literary magazine. Hence, I describe my students' response to censorship, to demonstrate how they as a collective embraced their agency.

Promoting Confidence

The publication of their poetry was important for several students in the class. Early in the school year, they had begun to ask about publishing their work, but I had intentionally told them to not worry about publishing yet. I asked them to wait until closer to the end of the year, so that they would have a larger body of work to choose from. My intention was to protect my students by keeping them safe from the harsh realities of the world of publication. It was not because their work was not good enough to publish. I knew it was, but were they, as individuals, ready for the fickle, capitalistic world of publishing? Given their negative attitudes about self and their feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness, I did not think it was the right time to introduce them to more rejection.

My students were just beginning to create, and I did not want them adding pressure on themselves by worrying about whether “this poem was good enough for public consumption.” Rejection letters, contest losses, and outside criticism were responses that had the potential to make a young writer want to give up. I was worried that they wouldn’t see rejection as a part of the process that all writers must endure due to the publishing industry’s priorities of money making over talent and art. Instead, I was worried that they would see rejection as a personal affront on their work by the external readers who may have a different view of ‘good’ writing. Believing they were ‘not good enough’ writers for publication in the adult world might cause them to forget about seriously considering writing later in life. I know many adult poets who, after several rejections, came to believe that they simply were not good enough poets, and so stopped writing and just let their work begin to collect dust rather than risk more rejection by sending their work out into the world again. As a published author, I have had those same feelings of worthlessness when my second book of poetry was not embraced by the publishing world. It was very difficult for me to simply believe in my talent and understand that the right publisher just had not yet seen my work, and when they did I would feel a sense of validation and recognized as a writer. I did not want my fragile young writers experiencing these feelings in their current state of mind. As rejection can cripple the most confident and talented of writers, I could just painfully imagine what rejection would do to my students who both lacked confidence and were using poetry to reconstruct and redefine self. If they stopped writing and gave up due to rejection early in the year, then the disempowering feelings associated with rejection of one’s writing could influence them to stop the process of writing and worse, the process of writing self.

I felt I had to protect them by removing the pressure to publish from their lives. I wanted them to gain confidence in themselves and their writing by interacting with this particular audience within our classroom. They did not need outside forces to validate them as writers; they needed only each other and themselves. I realize this may seem that I was sheltering them too much or that I was setting them up for future failure by insulating them with the warmth and nurturing of our classroom, but I would argue that all writers need a safe place to write, develop, and grow before they venture out into the cruel world of publishing. These were, after all, still children I was working with, despite the very adult themes they had been writing about and experiencing in their daily lives. Protecting them not only served to delay the potentially disempowering world of publication, it also allowed them the opportunity to empower themselves by having the time to develop a belief in self and belief in self as writer, which could get them through the tough times ahead in the world and the world of publishing.

Knowing that I could not protect them forever and because they kept asking for outlets to publish their work, I began looking for safer places for them to send their work. The class ended in May, so in late March, I began discussing opportunities to publish with the class. For instance, I did not make copies of anything that required an entry fee to avoid scams. I also avoided anything that clearly accepted any submission in order to sell the kid's parents an expensive book, plaque, or tape of their poem, which inevitably proud parents would rush to buy. I also avoided anything that also catered to college students, thereby dealing an inherent stacked deck against my students in the competition. It wasn't that I didn't think my students' work couldn't win against older students, but my own arrogance wasn't enough reason to put them in a potentially disempowering

situation if they lost. I needed contests and publications that gave a chance to succeed. Neither was I giving them a false sense of grandeur as is done to young prizefighters who achieve victories over journeyman contenders to build a record, a name, and a sense of confidence. Even though the publication outlets I selected were limited to high school students, the subjective nature of poetry and the peculiar eye of the editor or judge reading the poetry made success a possible outcome that could instill more pride and confidence. Unfortunately, many of the April and May deadlines meant that the students would not learn the results prior to the end of the class, so that data would be out of my scope. In order to get them some more immediate results, I made it an assignment to send their work to the school's literary magazine, which publishes poetry, art, and shorter prose pieces. The submissions for this magazine only came from other students in the school, so my students would only be competing against their peers at school. In a school of two thousand students, the literary magazine typically only received two hundred submissions a year, so I thought this would be the safest outlet for their work. This venue, which I had thought would be the easiest and safest for their work to be accepted, ironically turned out to be the most controversial.

I did not offer an opinion on which poems they should send to the school magazine. I felt they should choose which of their writings they wanted to share with the school. Since there was no limit on the number of submissions, I wasn't worried about them leaving out a good poem. In hindsight, I wonder if I should have helped them make their selections as I did with the contests that only allowed one to three poems to be submitted by each writer. We tried to not only pick their best work, but tried to match the poem to the contest specifications, or sponsors' affiliations. With the school, I should

have reminded them of the conservative stance of the school, but they had been in the building for four years and know very well the school climate. Even if I had seen poems that I felt might have tripped the conservative censors at the school, I would have simply told them the poems might get rejected on that basis, but I would have still told them to submit the ones they really wanted to.

Normal protocol for the school magazine has the staff sponsor receive the submissions, copy them without the student names attached, give them to the student magazine staff, who then reads, discusses, and votes on accepting the poem in the magazine. This year, the sponsor added an extra step to the process. Due to administrative flack from student-accepted poems in previous years, and to avoid professional criticism and questions of judgment and leadership abilities for allowing controversial poems in the “student run and student choice” magazine, this year’s sponsor was reading the poems at the copy machine and removing pieces that would raise a red flag if the students accepted it. I didn’t find this out until the sponsor asked me my opinion about one of Susan’s poems that had been pulled prior to the student selection process.

Susan had written a poem about parents fighting, which we had in fact already read, discussed, and praised for its enduring image of the child who, instead of falling asleep to the sounds of the parents through the walls, only wants to fall asleep to silence. In class, we talked about how it built bridges to other students whose parents were fighting, letting them know they were not alone, or to blame, or weird because only their parents fought. The sponsor pulled the poem because it was in the first person, and real or not, the “I” implied problems in the home which might cause embarrassment to the

student's parent who was also a staff member. Out of the sponsor's compassion for a colleague and to avoid any potential problems, the poem was pulled. I understood the sponsor's concerns and was glad I didn't have to make that choice because I might have let the poem go to the students. I told the sponsor I would be comfortable breaking the news to Susan that her poem had not been accepted as a submission.

I told Susan about the concern for her parent and the deal offered, which was a note from her parent saying the poem was o.k. for public eyes. Susan said she didn't want to show it to her parent because it made her feel like a little kid. "I don't see why I need permission, if it is my poem." But she later added she "could see how it might be a problem for her parent", so she decided to drop the issue and not resubmit her poem. Her decision made me feel funny at first, but then I let it go because it was her poem and she was entitled to her feelings. I put her well-being ahead of both of my colleagues' and just encouraged her to keep writing. To help encourage her, I did tell her that the sponsor enjoyed the poem and said she was a great writer. "Yeah, if I am so good, then why isn't my work in the magazine?" she said with a sarcasm that stung me into silence.

Internally, I realized she was right. She seemed to not believe the fact that she was a good writer. She saw the compliment as a nice thing to say to a bad writer whose poem was rejected. I honestly did not know what to tell Susan in order for her to avoid the disempowering notion that she was not good enough. I could not make her believe anything, which is why creating empowering opportunities is so difficult. In this particular instance I failed her because I could not think of anything to try.

Little did I know, Susan's poem was only the beginning of a series of my students poems that were rejected by the magazine sponsor. Over the next several days, the

sponsor came with several other poems that were pulled prior to the student choice process. Peggy's poem was removed because of the line from a discontent housewife wondering to herself if "sex on the floor next to the washing machine" was as exciting as her sterile life was ever going to get. Sondra's poem was removed because of the lines written as a prose poem

"Too much faith will give you stubborn pride, and so would you be no longer a Christian, but a Pharisee, worse, a Fundamentalist. A fundamentalist can understand black; a fundamentalist can understand wholly the Holy White. A fundamentalist cannot understand abortion or the color gray. Which is quite a shame: Because love is not black or white or gray. It's orange."

Ayo's poem was removed because of the lines about the things he didn't cry over like his mom saying,

*"your father is dying and you don't believe the shyt,
you fuckin think she's lyng, that's real aint it,
that is what I live with everyday of my life,
so why should I cry when I hear about a man beating his wife.
Why should I cry if there's another terrorist attack,
why, I didn't cry when the U.S. bombed Iraq."*

Hank's poem was removed because of the similes used to describe how a root reaches for the surface like *"burning black churches, a heroin junkie pushing in a needle for salvation, teenage hookers sucking cock for a living, immigrants looking for a better existence suffocating in the hatch of a smugglers truck, or raised radio antennas from soldiers in Vietnam screaming into microphones why the F~<X are we here."*

Finally, another one of Susan's poems was removed because it again dealt with her parents.

Rather than get into a debate about whether the poems should have been removed or not, I decided to withhold my opinions both in class and in my retelling of the story. Instead, the focus should be on the students and their response to the problem. It didn't take long for the word to spread about their poems being removed. To support their classmates, the non-banned students began to share poems that they were sure would be removed as well due to certain words or similar references. The thought of submitting

them just to get banned was a subversive idea that surfaced, but they couldn't figure out what that would prove other than a solidarity they already felt, so they did not do that *en masse*. Only Adam tried to get banned by putting in a sexual comment about Freud, but the magazine accepted his poem, thereby neutralizing the idea that the process just wasn't fair. One of the magazine staff members who was also in the class tried to defend the students on the magazine staff by saying that if the students had seen the poems, they would have voted for them to be in the magazine, or at most would have just asked the poet to change the curse words. Her other point was that maybe the poems were just in the pile and they were yet to be seen by the staff, so they couldn't have been rejected. I told her that she was in fact mistaken, and that the sponsor had pulled the poems without their knowledge. "Our sponsor wouldn't do that. That takes the power out of our hands and defeats the purpose of a student magazine." Mary said.

"It is censorship in a school! What else did you expect? Democracy?" Hank lashed out. Once the idea of being censored was introduced, it became the rallying cry for the other students in the class. I never said the word censorship and I did not lead this discussion. I just told them facts and they reacted and organized. Staying out of their way became my way of creating an opportunity for empowerment. If I had jumped in and told them what to do or what was happening to them or how I felt, then they would not have had the chance to realize and react on their own, and to move to appropriate action in response to something that was disempowering. Below is the conversation that my students initiated in response to the censorship they were facing.

"We should take this to the principal," Mary said, which raised hearty laughter, because it Mary had been on the magazine staff for several years and our Principal had never forced an advisor to put poems in the magazine. Then Ayo asked the question I

hoped to avoid. “Mr. Daniel, didn’t you get banned, too, after you read those poems at the open mic poetry slam last year in school?”

“Well, I didn’t get banned because I had already read them. I just got lectured because the administration didn’t think the words in the poem or their subject matter were appropriate for high school students.”

“But the poems were really good, I remember that,” Jasmine said.

“Everyone remembers that,” Mark added.

“Isn’t that why they didn’t let you teach this course last year? Then they wrote that article in the school paper because the students were upset they didn’t get you as a teacher?”

Hank probed.

“I can tell you what I told the paper. The school can place staff wherever they want, and my not getting the class was a staffing issue.” They could tell from my tone that the truth was, yes, my poems did cost me the class last year, the chance to do this study last year, and potentially to conduct this study at all, which almost resulted in me having to transfer schools to complete my dissertation. Rather than rehash old news, I asked them what they felt about their current problem and what they were going to do about it.

“I just think this sucks, and we are good writers with things to say. Our voices need to be heard,” Sondra responded. “We should just publish our own poems,” Hank suggested, which led to a conversation about publishing costs and a distribution problem. The bottom line was that they really had no money, and they knew that they were not allowed to distribute on school property without getting into more trouble and facing disciplinary action.

Desi came to their rescue by suggesting they create their own website and publish online. That idea seemed the most practical response, so they began to plan. Desi agreed to design the website and secured access to a free host to avoid the money issues.

Sondra, Hank, and Lucy began to collect ideas from the class in order to draft a mission statement or a rationale to put on the home page of the website. Adam said he knew about advertising and ways to alert students at our school and other schools about the poems so they would have an audience, which gave Desi the idea of creating a link so

other schools could add their poetry, too. Marlon and Jasmine headed up the mission of collecting everyone's first poem they wanted to go on the website, while Peggy, Susan, and Mary gave input on colors, and other design issues. The discussion moved to naming the website and whether they wanted pictures or student profiles. I was careful to remain in the distance and moved away from the planning and the future planning of this activity. If this was something they wanted to do, then I felt they should do it; furthermore, I felt they would more closely demonstrate my idea of empowerment if I stayed away from being the driving force of this project. Our solidarity needed to take a back seat to their passion, their voices, and their autonomous goals about their poetry. If this was going to be an emancipatory pronouncement, and part of the change and social action pieces of critical literacy Freire's pedagogy, then I had to back off and let them become the leaders of our class and our curriculum. It was a good test for me as to whether or not I was forcing transformation and self-expression, or if those ideals were something they had in fact bought into. I knew how much work it would take to launch a website and how easy it would be for students to get frustrated and quit. The question was, did their voices mean enough to them to follow through and make the world hear them? Obviously, I can't reveal the website because it would violate their confidentiality, but they did in fact launch their very own website, with their own poems and mission statement and pictures. They are updating their page with their latest works and their voices are being heard. Rather than allow their voices to be alienated, they took it upon themselves to place their thoughts and ideas into the public domain. A potentially disempowering situation turned into one of the most empowering events of the class. I believe my students were empowered because they took action to end the oppression of

their poetry and voices. They took action and established an outlet for themselves to be heard, because they believed what they had to say in their poetry was important and worth sharing with the world. They took advantage of the opportunity created for them by the censorship itself, and by both my bringing the problem to their attention and my willingness to stay out of their way as they solved their own dilemma.

The final chapter in the literary magazine story came at the end of the year when the magazine was distributed and every person in our class did in fact get at least one piece they wrote in our class into the magazine. The sponsor thanked me in the acknowledgements section of the magazine for encouraging my students to write and submit, because their poems represented the majority of the magazine. “Special thanks to Mr. Daniel the instructor of this year’s creative writing class, for encouraging his students to submit their poetry and prose.” In fact, they represented just under half of the students whose poetry or prose was selected for the magazine listed in the index. Since my students had multiple pieces accepted, their work was represented on 31 of 63 pages of text. My students’ faces beamed when they got their acceptance letters to the magazine.

Their excitement was, however, diminished because the poems or pieces that they really cared about did not get into the magazine. “I don’t even like the one they picked,” echoed through the room. Now some of that complaining I chalked up to high school students not knowing how to be happy and accept praise, but some of it was also bitterness at not getting the pieces that really represented who they were as writers into the magazine. Even though my students’ names and poems were represented in the magazine, my students felt that as individuals, they were not represented in the magazine.

The self and identity that they had struggled to put and develop on paper was not represented in the school magazine, so their peers would only know a small piece of them or their poetry. That small piece was not always the piece they wanted their peers to see first. Only part of them was revealed; the part the school approved of. I had never thought of publication as a form of accepting of self and identity before this, but it makes sense when one thinks about what being rejected by publishers can do to the psyche of professional poets, not to mention student poets. I only hope that their self-publication helped ease the pain of not having their work accepted by the school. Even if it did help, did this episode simply reinforce the powerlessness they felt in relation to school power that they previously held? I have to believe that owning your own magazine and publishing your own work helps the writer be heard and accepted by those who choose to read their work, but there is something inherently important about at-large social acceptance. Social acceptance seemed to be critical for my students to feel validated as people and artists.

In conclusion then, my discussion of students' quest to publish and their ensuing actions speaks to the importance of one of critical literacy's cornerstone concepts: how the individual sees him/herself in relation to society. I think I was spending so much time building my students up and protecting them in class, I forgot at times that I could not separate them from society. While our class might have been a safe haven for them, it could not be a permanent shelter from their social realities. After all, isn't school supposed to better equip students for the society in which they live? All of the work I was doing to help my students move beyond their negative self-images and create opportunities for self empowerment cannot be constructed in a vacuum. My students

were so fragile that I think I didn't pay enough attention to the piece about their participation as poets in the larger society. In a sense, I separated the individual from society, which is not plausible. Their experience with the school literary magazine helped me better understand the complexities of the real world my students had to face. I was glad to see that they had the capacity to protect their own voices. Their positive action gave me solace, because it showed me that by paying close attention to the individual, I had not done them a disservice vis-à-vis their reentry into the social. In my original understanding of critical literacy theory, I placed too much emphasis on the individual's relationship to society. My students helped me realize the importance of focusing more on the individual's relationship to the self first. My students demonstrated that when the individual is fragile and has self-image issues, the individual must be privileged over the social until the individual is ready to deal with society again. My students may have been ill-equipped as un-whole individuals for the work of critical literacy to be done as I theorized. My work highlights the complexities of making critical literacy lived pedagogy in the classroom. Though Freire discusses the difficulties the individual will have ending oppression, I don't think I realized the length of time it takes to help the individual change their thinking when I first thought about the empowerment process. Students need more time and opportunities to work on their individual issues, before the group solidarity and social action can be focused on with full force. In this case, my students needed opportunities for empowerment and time to take advantage of those opportunities before they were ready to deal with the social world of publication and censorship.

Creating opportunities for empowerment through dialogue

In order to demonstrate how I used dialogue about poetry to help students think about empowerment and agency, this section highlights one of the many poetry readings we had throughout the year. Students volunteered to read their poetry during the weekly poetry reading sessions. The protocol was the student read the poem twice, and then students asked the poet to clarify any aspects of the poem such as words, or phrases they did not hear clearly or understand. Students then began to comment on the poem itself. After the initial like or dislike of the poem, my role was to facilitate a discussion of the critical issue that the poem and poet brought to our attention. My goal was to use the poet's lens to help the class begin to critically think about self and their relationship to society.

The particular poetry reading that I focus on is Ayo's poem about a young man who took the wrong path by hanging out, fighting, selling weed, and shooting the man that stabbed his brother. This poem sparked a discussion about the realization of going down the wrong path in the real lives of my students. I used this incident to push them in their thinking about changing their lives. After the discussion of Ayo's poem, my students moved the discussion to the purpose of poetry. Their questioning of how poetry could help them make changes in their lives helped better understand my own pedagogy in this poetry class. The conversation during the poetry reading then shifted to the purpose of the creative writing class itself and my teaching practices. Their insights into the course taught me about the importance of poetry in their lives and revealed the potential and power of my pedagogical and theoretical underpinnings in shaping their

lives. This section concludes with an analysis of the importance my students placed on our class and opportunities for empowerment in the lives of my students.

*Moving too Fast
You started out a lil yougin
Having fun and running with thief's
Swore u was a gangsta
Cause your brothers name was known in the streets
So u got bolder
And thought you could never be touched
You see kids back then couldn't wait to grow up
So you're a lil older now
And you think you're it
Cause you're making some money now
Selling weed and shyt
Buying brand new j's
And wearing expensive clothes
By the time you know it now you're 16 years old
And you've been watching gangsta movies
Like Scarface and Heat
So now you have the courage to go out and start some beef
It started when you was punkin dudes at school
Then you and your mans went to a party and started acting a fool
By now you're already in too deep
And u come across a person who doesn't fear your beef
But you keep talking shyt cause you swear you're bad
And as a result of your talking
The next week your brother gets stabbed
So now you're distraught and overcome with anger
So you decide to smoke an ounce of weed
And grab your ranger
And then you come up on the dude that stabbed your brother
And you kill him in cold blood
With no thoughts of his brother
So now six months have past and u still can't sleep
The feds are looking for you now
And you're feeling that heat
And you hear a knock on the door but you don't care to run
They read you your rights and slap on the cuffs
And you know you're done
Two months have past and you're at your trail
Waiting to be sentenced
Then the judge comes out and says
You'll be serving life*

*But now you feel peace at last
And realized you were a good ?????
Who moved too fast?*

After reading his poem to the class, the class clapped. Marlon said, “Now that is hot.” Sondra and Susan told him how much they liked the endings and avoided clichés, that the speaker did not die or get away with it; he just dealt with his actions. Sondra thanked him for staying in the story and not getting preachy. I asked them why there was nobody to help the kid in the poem and if Ayo was making a comment on society. Adam said he doubted it and Hank said the kid was just following bad models. “Yes, could Ayo be saying that is the problem? The kid was impressionable. But, why was there no one giving him positive models to follow?” I asked. I asked them if they were the type of kids who were the positive models. Jesses laughed and said no one would want him as a model, and people chuckled knowing his abysmal grade point average. “Are you all just sitting back and watching their stories end like Ayo’s poem or are you trying to help?” I asked them. This poem seemed to be asking them a social question and I wanted them to begin to think about if change were possible for people like the boy in this poem in their society, and if they could be the change agents. I was intrigued by the lack of agency they felt.

“I am trying, but I don’t want to be their parent,” Marlon said.
“Maybe a real young kid we can help a little, but the people in our age group are not trying to listen to us,” Ayo added.
“Yeah, they just say why would I listen to you man, you are doing the same stuff I have been doing,” Marlon explained.
“O.k. What about the younger kids? Can you save them?” I asked, trying to make sure the conversation didn’t fall too quickly into hopelessness and helplessness, which would be quite disempowering.
“I can talk to them, but I can’t save them. They don’t have to listen,” Ayo said.

“If they don’t want to be saved, what can we do?” Peggy asked.

“If a high school kid talked to me when I was younger, I would have just told them they were lying and ignored them. I wouldn’t listen. Just telling kids what is good and bad without any real reason turns you into an adult talker, which is really bad,” Desi added.

It was interesting that Desi designated adult discourse as futile and preachy. To reach students like these, I could not use traditional adult discourse and launch into ‘do the right things’ morality stance. I choose to continue to probe and ask questions to promote more dialogue on their part. I wanted them thinking and problem solving for themselves. My strategy was to give them enough stimulation and space to empower themselves. In essence, I wanted them to discuss the possibility of being able to make a difference in the world.

“The only way they will listen to you is if you have already been down the wrong path and can prove to them you did bad stuff. If you just start telling them the right things, they will be like what does he know?” Ayo added.

“Well, what about actions then? Can’t you all show them different experiences?”

I asked, trying to make them think beyond mere words, which they found to be meaningless when spoken to young people in lecture form. They seemed be arguing that one had to have done and survived bad actions to have credibility in the lives of people on the wrong path. I wanted them to consider positive actions as a power source, too, but that was met with skeptics who recalled their experience with a school program in middle school called DARE, which focused on preventing teen drinking.

“Yeah, right? How many of us did the D.A.R.E. program and how many of us actually followed through?” Desi asked.

“We all signed that contract, but it didn’t work,” Ayo said.

“Yeah, I was drunk by seventh grade,” Jesse said.

“Me, too.” Desi said.

They begin to laugh and mock the program. To settle them back down, I tried to summarize. “So you all are saying you can’t change those younger than you or your peers?”

“Yeah, we have no credibility. We are doing the same things, but we are able to get away with it and still do well. We can party and get things done, but they won’t listen because we do party,” Ayo insisted.

“So are teenagers finished? You say adults and peers can’t reach them.” I prodded them to see if they could begin to see possibilities for change. I hoped they would reject the idea of things being utterly hopeless and begin to think that change was possible.

“Well, maybe we would listen to college kids.” Jasmine said, but Desi said, “At eighteen we are not going to listen to anybody until we fail ourselves.”

“That is pretty depressing, if you are telling me you just have to wait until you all hit rock bottom.” I said, but Adam and Desi said it was just the facts.

“If that is true, then can you come back from rock bottom and what would rock bottom be for you?” I asked.

They agreed that you could come back, which helped me understand they did believe that change was possible, but not until they hit the ultimate failure, and their rock bottoms varied. I did not like this disempowering belief that they were helpless to change until they hit rock bottom. It seemed as an easy excuse not to change anything yet because things were not that bad yet. The idea of waiting in a state of suspended animation until disaster occurred was not a powerful position. I sat in awe as they began to tell their tales of hitting rock bottom.

“I almost failed fifth grade.” Lucy says while laughing.

“Mine was tenth grade with alcohol and weed,” Marlon told us. In fact, “if I had not moved away from there and come up here, I probably would have dropped out of school by now. I would be a drunk on a corner somewhere, messed up.”

“What got you out of your habits?” I asked.

“Getting away from my peers. When I go back to visit and see them, I can’t figure out why they are still doing it. In my eyes they look really sad.”

“Could they suck you back into your old ways?”

“Naw, not really. I have more will power now. I got caught so many times that it just gets to you,” Marlon said, and Ayo agreed that getting caught was the best thing for teenagers because when you don’t get caught you get braver. He told us how he used to steal everyday and got greedier and greedier. Finally he got caught at a store and the store called the police, who handcuffed him and took him to the police station instead of home like they used to do.

“My rock bottom was in ninth and tenth grade with drugs and alcohol, too. I am kinda out of it, but whenever I get around my old crew, I do go right back into it for a minute. I had to run from the police and I try not to get arrested for my mom. I am just a recreational and party drug user these days,” Jesse said.

“Is jail the only deterrent for you all?” I ask.

“I couldn’t stand to be locked up, but some of my friends have been locked up more than once and they just don’t care,” Ayo said.

“Yeah, I got family the same way. Jail only works if you get scared straight the first time, then it is nothing.” Marlon added.

“So escaping the people, the lifestyle, the neighborhood, which are the backdrop of these behaviors has helped many of you,” I said rhetorically, and they nodded. “How do you get away?”

“We can’t unless someone picks you up and moves you,” Jesses said, and Ayo agreed by telling the story of his mom moving him out of a bad neighborhood.

“Is it up to an older force to come in and save you? Are you all incapable of saving yourselves?”

I asked because they seemed to be saying that they were powerless again. If an adult didn’t step in, then they would be lost forever. This was the same attitude they displayed in the poems analyzed earlier in this section. Instead of challenging my notion about not needing outside help to change their lives, they agreed that change was out of their hands.

“Yes, we need extremes. Talking won’t help.” Desi said.

“Does the poetry you are writing help at all? Does it matter?” Where does it fit in between the extreme physical relocation and the talking that doesn’t seem to help?”

I wanted them to begin thinking about the purposes of this class. I also wanted to know for my own reasons if they believed that my approach to writing poetry helped them at all. If they told me it didn’t help, then I would have to begin to rethink my assumptions and beliefs about the power of poetry. I did believe that their poetry was one vehicle to help them express their selves and lives, and with my help, to begin to think critically about their lives and experiences and grow and improve in areas they saw a need to change. I saw this class and the writing of poetry as a way for them to be change agents, so I needed to know where they stood now that we had hit the mid point of the year. I remembered what they said were the purposes for poetry on the second day of class, so now that they were writing poetry, was it really their therapy, their outlet for emotions, their place to express themselves? Was their poetry really creating opportunities for change and empowerment? As the following excerpt from the class discussion reveals, I did not have to wait long for their answers to the questions I was pondering.

“Well, it helps you let out your thoughts. And it is nice to find out that other people think the way you think. You are not a loser. Other people have the same problem,” Ayo said.

“Writing the poem about my friend who was sixteen and shot his dad in the face helped me,” Marlon said.

“I would shoot my dad in the face. I don’t have a gun, but if I did last night, I would have shot him in the face. I’m glad I didn’t have one, or he would’ve been dead. My writing helps, but as soon as I write the poem and tie the issue up, he does something else, then I have to go and write about that. He just keeps doing stuff.” Jesse shocked us.

“Are we glad he is writing and not shooting?” I asked, and got a yes chorus. Clearly their writing was helping them cope with their worlds, but I didn’t hear anyone saying the writing was solving anything. Sondra echoed this concern.

“The writing doesn’t help. Well, it does help to a point. It helps me deal with the problem, but nothing changes. It is an outlet, not a solution,” Sondra said.

Sondra’s “the writing only helps to a point” comment reminded me of Jasmine who had a similar complaint. Jasmine said “I can’t write poetry anymore because I have written enough that I see who I was and don’t like it. I don’t want to write about the pain anymore.” They had been writing poetry and expressing emotions, coping with problems, and they had begun to see their life and selves more clearly after writing so much. I had not anticipated that they would hit the point where they saw themselves through their writing and did not know what to write anymore because they did not like what they saw and did not want to continue writing about that person who was so flawed and not who they wanted to be anymore. Sondra could see herself and poetry helped her “deal with herself” but she did not see how poetry could “change” anything. Poetry now seemed limited to them because they had exposed self and didn’t see how poetry could help them change self. When poetry was defined only as an outlet, it had served its purpose once the students expressed themselves. Poetry then had to adapt for them. Poetry had to be about more than just expressing self if it was to survive in their lives and, more importantly, help them survive their lives. Expanding the purpose of poetry beyond expression of emotion and oppression was not something I had thought about before the class when reading theory, but this issue was clearly a crossroad for the power of poetry in the lives of my students. It was such a problem for me that I to begin to reexamine my view of poetry.

Rethinking the purpose of poetry

I had put so much stock in Audre Lorde's theory about poetry as expression and a means to expose oppression was so much of my world as a poet and poetry teacher, that I had overlooked the limitations of her theory. Just surviving was no longer enough for my students. The young women and men in my class were writing, naming, and expressing their repressed and hidden feelings, but were not seeing the lasting action. They felt better in the present about their past, but could not see a map to improving the reality they were now dissatisfied with in their poetry. They were asking an important question: what is the next step in the process? They saw themselves through their poetry and did not like their view, but did not know how to make changes or how poetry could help them make changes in their lives. As a teacher, I was forced to begin to think about how I was going to help them over this hurdle through my comments on their poetry. How do we move from the poem and the page to the real lives of students and the improvement of their lives?

My students had ended their silence about the way they viewed themselves. They had clearly articulated they felt powerless, worthless, ugly, unlovable, and that they felt bad about the way they saw themselves. They were awakened, they had vocalized, they were dissatisfied, but they did not see a way to fix or solve their condition. We were aware, but my students didn't see themselves as credible change agents. They didn't believe they could make a difference in the lives of their peers or in their own lives. My students needed to feel empowered if they were going to move forward. The only solution they saw was an outside force stepping in to save them, but that notion was also disempowering. Where was the blueprint in poetry to saving and empowering

themselves? My students had a valid question, and as their teacher, I needed to expand on the theories I came into the class with, in order to address their specific concerns which the theories I believed in were failing to address. Given this theoretical crossroads, I had to help them see that change was first possible, then achievable, and most importantly that the keys to change resided in their poetry and their actions, not on any outside force acting as a savior after they hit rock bottom.

After my students' comments during the poetry reading helped me rethink my understanding of poetry theory, I needed to help them see how poetry and they themselves could serve as change agents. The conversation sparked from Ayo's poem was still going on, and so I offered the best solution I could think of at the time.

"Well, for the writing and the outlets to begin to have more power, you may need to begin to put these new thoughts you are having into action. Are you just going to let your thoughts end on the paper as blueprints to a better life? Or are you going to begin to actualize them and make changes? Why can't we begin to write poems about the future and how we want it to be? For example, Sondra says the writing doesn't help, but does she look happier than she did when we met her the first week of school?" I asked.

"Yes, she looks happier," Ayo quickly stated which coaxed four or five more 'yeahs'.

"Maybe it's just that when she's in this class, she is so happy to be around all of us," Susan suggested.

"Yeah, you people rock," Sondra said, "but the process of bringing my writing to life is so long and tedious and hard. Since I'm not moving to action, the writing is not helping."

"You have to write it first at the beginning of the process. It gets all of the stuff out of your head and releases you to begin to deal with it and find a solution. This class is helping me," Mark said, trying to reassure Sondra.

Mark helped me to see that writing may be the beginning stage of change, and not the solution in and of itself. The writing, the voicing, the telling, the expression and articulation of what the person has inside may be a very important first step in the change

process. Without writing it, naming it and making it real, which means getting things out in the open instead of stuck inside the student's head, the student would not be able to name their problem and begin to face it. Once people come to realize and understand the issue, then they can begin to think about changing the situation. I didn't want this class to end with my students feeling frustrated from seeing their problems through their writing, yet feeling powerless to do anything about it. If I didn't find a way to push them beyond this point in the process, then my work with these students would be benign at best and a catalyst for hopelessness and depression at worst. The end is moving away from the poor images of self and the powerlessness expressed in their poems, and moving toward writing new poems, which name new images and new realities, through which they can visualize where they want to be in the future. The next step needed to entail challenging their fears and beliefs that they could not change things by themselves. Once empowered, they could begin to move toward real changes in their real lives. Part of the answer to our dilemma was answered as the conversation about Ayo's poem shifted to a conversation about the class itself.

Our class as vehicle for change

Now that we had begun to discuss real life changes, the class itself became the subject of conversation during the final moments of the class period in which we had been discussing Ayo's poem. Students began to inform me about the importance of the class in their lives. After presenting their comments, the case will be made for the class and my teaching as another opportunity for empowerment. The following excerpt took place the last ten minutes of class after Ayo's poem.

Someone said the class stopped them from being so lazy, and Desi interrupted to say, "I come to school for this class."

“Yeah, that *is* true,” Sondra added.

“Yeah, after this class, I am ready to bounce up out of here,” Jesse agreed.

“Yeah, first period or not, my day is over,” Marlon said.

“Yeah, every other class is like blah blah blah high school credit whatever. This class doesn’t seem like a class,” Desi added.

“This is a chill class,” Marlon added, “because you can be you.”

“And you get to say whatever the hell you want to say. What other classes you write about your teacher and not get in trouble or have any conflict?” Ayo asked.

“Every other class is so structured. You have to do it this way or you fail,” Lucy said.

“I guess in my mind,” I told them, “you are the structure. Your thoughts, feelings, emotions, and lives are the class, so you can’t fail. A lot of the things I read getting ready for this class said that students don’t feel a sense of ownership in school and are alienated, but I am arguing that teaching poetry this way can help reconnect you all with school.”

I believe given my students’ comments, that the positive experience of being in this creative writing community in their school helped many of them feel less alienated. They had something in their school day that was theirs and it was providing them with fuel to get through the rest of their school day. If one class was enough to bring them to school and keep them from skipping, it wasn’t just the opportunity to write poetry that was important in their lives, but also the way we had been dialoguing and thinking. By allowing students’ lives to be situated at the center of the classroom learning experiences, my students did not feel like they were trapped in yet another class they didn’t feel connected to. To take advantage of the space to explore their own lives and world meant they were seizing an empowering opportunity each and every time they wrote and dialogued together.

“Yeah, I didn’t sleep in today because I knew we were going to hear some poems,” Ayo admitted.

“I would have missed so many days of school if I didn’t have this class to come to. That’s why I am not losing credit in class like I have done before,” Desi agreed.

“This is the only class I actually want to come to,” Lucy said followed by a “me, too” from Sondra.

“After I leave here, I go to regular English, and now after our talks about poems, I can’t figure out why I am there,” Desi added.

“Regular English is supposed to teach us to write better, but they only teach you to write their way with their structure. I feel like I am learning more about writing and the way things should be in this class than I am in AP English,” Susan said as Peggy nodded approvingly.

“Yeah, I wish I had this class in the middle of the day and all my slum classes in the morning. That way, once I was about to leave school, I would have this class, so I would just stay the whole day,” Ayo said.

“I like how you all are sharing and connecting with each other and connecting with this school. That is why I keep encouraging all of you to share more of your writing with each other. You must continue to build bridges between your lives.”

The more I listened to them, the more I began to think about the traditional approaches to poetry instruction that, I argued, would in fact be disempowering. I was worried that I was just theorizing for a while, but hearing these students talk made my ideas more concrete. I know students complain about school, but what I was hearing spoke more to alienation and marginalization. The desire to get away from the school and classes was strong, but what amazed me was the power of one class, which centralized their issues and lives, to bring them back. Instead of skipping school as usual, they were making the choice to remain. It was as if this one class had given them hope that something else could be worthwhile during the rest of their day. I would argue that hope in education is enough to combat feelings of alienation, because now they believed there might be something in their school and all of education for them. They just needed

to seek it out and find other classes like this one. All was not lost after all, because somewhere, in school, they did matter, and had a stake, I told them.

“The funny thing is, many experts say that I should be giving you models, assigning you poems, and having you write various forms.”

“That is *not* poetry,” Ayo barked, which I also argued extensively in my literature review.

“I hated the writing class I had like that. It made me want to quit writing,” Sondra agreed.

“We are forced to write those poems in regular English class. We are not doing poetry, we are just getting the work done for a grade,” Lucy remarked.

“In one class, back in middle school, we went through poetry books and borrowed lines from other poets to make a poem. It was fun to make off combinations, but I wasn’t learning anything,” Peggy remembered.

“That is because there was no point. It was like you were jamming down your own creativity to glorify someone else’s creativity. They are telling you that you can’t do anything yourself. It is telling us we are worthless and we don’t have any creativity,” Desi said angrily.

For the first time, I could actually see a clear connection between their negative self-images and the ways in which school and classes have been traditionally handled. My students were arguing that many of their prior high school courses were delivering the message that they were worthless and lacked creativity because they were not able to name and create their own world in their classes. They were not able to be themselves, let alone explore themselves, which is what I was asking them to do. To hear them talking about quitting writing and quitting school angered me because I knew public school classes did not have to continue to operate in disempowering ways.

“Well, in so many ways, this class does operate differently from the traditional approaches to teaching poetry. You are all saying that this method is rewarding

you as students, and that is something the other teachers and the powers that be will be interested in.” I realized that I did not define this method, but my students seemed to understand what I meant in part.

“It is partly your attitude, too, not just the class structure. You put the burden on us. If we turn in the work we get an A, but if we don’t, we fail. You don’t care about the grade and stress us like other teachers,” Ayo told me.

“You are not like a teacher at all,” Desi told me, which I took as a compliment because I remembered her series of poems mocking teachers and questioning the educational system. But what did this mean to not be like a teacher? Was I so different in this room than I was in my regular classes?

“Well, actually, in regular English I am slightly different, because I have to toe the line. I am still me and sometimes a clown, but in here I don’t have to make you feel like you are in school. If I did, you all would act and behave just like you do in all those other classes and then this class would be torturous too. You all know what you want to write about - you are defining good poetry, not me.” I thought that by telling them I wanted to relinquish the form of power given to teachers in traditional education, they would continue to gain confidence to trust their own views.

“Yeah, I hate when teachers try to tell you what you meant to say and what a good poem is. How are they going to tell me what I was talking about?” Ayo agreed.

“My one teacher only says the old poets are good, so where does that leave me?” Marlon asked.

“If you have noticed, I never tell you if I like your poems or not. I fight not to tell you my personal opinion of your poetry. Those aren’t the comments I try to make.”

The class began to laugh and mock some of the phrases they had seen on their poems like weak ending, confusing, re-order, and then the long essay-like comments they got on other poems. Hank ended the laughter by saying that they were good comments because they “help us improve our poems”, to which they agreed. They liked how I pointed out the good and the bad in the poems.

“I just don’t want to be in the position of having students trying to please me as the teacher. Worrying about if I like the poem won’t help any of you. You have to like the poem.” The more I could help them see that the lesson was about them, not a teacher and a grade, the more they could believe it was worth investing more of their time and energy to the class and their writing. I believed freeing them from having to please a teacher was empowering because they could become their own authority and judge. The power to define good was within them, not within me.

“If you ever wrote, ‘I really like this poem’, I would probably continue to write that way,” Lucy said, and I told her I wouldn’t want to stifle her creativity that way. I also didn’t want to be limited to that type of role as a teacher, which would depress me.

“Yeah, suggestions are better. I like that you comment that way because a lot of time they do make the poem better,” Peggy stated, but I quickly told her I liked when they took my suggestions but was just as happy when they said, ‘no, I am keeping the poem the way I like it.’ I needed them to understand that my ego was not supposed to be involved in teaching them. It was their poem and they owned it, so they had the power to make all final decisions and accept or reject anyone’s feedback.

“Yeah, but it can also discourage us. You are quick to point out problems on some poems, but other poems don’t have any comments,” Sondra offered.

“Well, truthfully, sometimes when your poems seem to be complete and closer to finished, there isn’t much I can say or do to improve them other than some minor edits. I just sit back and enjoy reading. But I don’t tell you, Sondra, because I don’t want to be another adult you have to please. I want you to be the one defining what is good and bad without having to look to me and outside yourself.” I had more to say, but the bell rang herding them off to second period. As they filed out, the energy was let out of my classroom. As they went down the hall toward their “other” classes, their shoulders began to slump.

After a discussion like that where students let you know that you matter and are not doing them a disservice as their teacher, I could not help but feel proud of myself and

good about the teacher I was for them. I thought about what enabled me to be who I was in this poetry classroom and realized it was a sense of freedom I felt to “do my own thing in the classroom”, which I have heard myself say before as well as other teachers. But, then I realized that I had been wrong. In fact, I had not been doing my own thing in the classroom at all. I no longer believe that freedom for a teacher lies in designing your own curriculum and selecting texts. I thought those things were freedom because they were the only measures of control and choice I had in the standards based curriculum driven world of teaching. That sense of freedom was nice because as an individual in a big system it gave me a sense of power because I made up my own plans, and chose the books not always taught, and occasionally got to design entire creative writing courses. That sense of personal freedom is nice, but I have learned that there is a better sense of freedom when it comes to teachers and curriculum.

It is the freedom to follow your students that I now value more than the sense of personal freedom I just mentioned. This study finally made me understand the term ‘the lived curriculum’. Yes, I did design the class, and I did have certain affinities towards choice, empowerment, critical literacy, community, social justice, and personal growth, but that only gave me an opportunity to experience something different. The something different was the journey teacher and student took together inside that curriculum, which was the real curriculum. I am so glad that what I elected to do with my individual teacher freedom was to feel free to follow my students through whatever issues and dilemmas they brought up in their writing and our discussions. Teacher freedom is now for me the ability to meet students wherever they are and work with them on whatever issues they have or need to learn in order for them to become complete, empowered human beings,

who are also confident in their identities and are able to love themselves. I always laughed when people said, “meet them where they are” because when a kid couldn’t read in eleventh grade English, I did not have the freedom to help that student. I had to refer that student and basically fail that student in every aspect of the word. I did and do not have time in English class to work with everyone’s unique writing deficiencies in the face of the unit objectives. For the first time, I felt the freedom to explore individual needs rather than just the external collective goal imposed by the county curriculum and core learning goals. I am not saying those goals and objectives are bad, just that there is not much room in them to explore the lives of my students in order for them to want to be in and help change their society with the skills they are learning in school. I would love to experience freedom in my everyday teaching life like I experienced in this classroom, but until class size and similar issues are reformed; I will have to continue doing the absolute best, yet inadequate, job of educating the masses. I will never teach another creative writing class where my students’ words, voices, issues, and writing are not the driving force of the lived curriculum. I will do my best to find more ways to transform my regular classroom to experience more of this true teacher freedom, which also provided more freedom, growth and humanity to students in that their individual needs were noticed and nurtured. I can try writing letters to my classes to begin dialogue, but after they write back I will have to be selective in who I write a follow up letter to because I cannot write one hundred and fifty letters. I can begin to move discussions of literature in the same empowering directions as the conversations about poetry in this chapter. I can have my students journal or write poetry as extension exercises when we discuss critical issues in class. Though time won’t let me comment on all as extensively as I did

in the poetry class, I can comment on that trouble me the most. The freedom to follow students provided two opportunities for empowerment: they had the opportunity to reinvest in school and self, and I had the opportunity to learn more about what I want education to mean in my classroom, which can help me have the confidence to try to change my practice in all my classes.

CHAPTER VII

Becoming Critically Literate about Self:

Critical Literacy as a Dimension of Humanizing Pedagogy

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the students' critical consciousness and awareness about changes in their self images, as well as their growth from their experiences during the course. The data analyzed in this chapter draws from end-of-the-year letters written by students and my responses to their letters. Students' understandings of self in this chapter center on issues of hope, freedom, and possibility. In addition to student growth revealed in their letters, this chapter also sheds light on teacher growth during the analysis of the letters. I primarily focus on how my students' insights helped prompt me to overtly name my ideas and beliefs about teaching, my roles in the teaching and learning process, and helped me shape my emerging understandings of critical literacy. For both teacher and student, the key to our transformation was the lived experience inside of a poetry classroom using critical literacy as humanizing pedagogy. Finally, this chapter also problematizes a previously benign event of thanking a teacher after a course ends by examining issues of disempowerment and empowerment in relation to who receives credit for the many transformations that took place during the course. The issue of credit and agency were important for me to address as my students left my class.

Authenticity of Student Self-Image Transformation

This section focuses on the use of the letters students wrote at the end of the year as indicators of the transformation that they themselves recognized. Since critical literacy asks individuals to be critically literate about the self, I believed my students

should have the opportunity to articulate their own ideas about self after the course had ended. I did not want to make claims as to how I believed they transformed, instead I wanted them to speak for themselves to provide a more authentic view of their changes. I first explain how the students came to write their year ending letters and then examine Desi's letter and my response to her letter in order to illustrate her new beliefs about herself and my understandings about teaching and critical literacy.

Often at the end of the year, a survey is administered to students, in order for teachers to receive feedback on their teaching. I firmly believed that asking my students direct questions or giving them a traditional end of course survey after this entire year of writing and growing together would have been too sterile and unnatural. This tool seemed inappropriate because our interactions and relationships were too intimate and varied for a standardized exit questionnaire to be useful or effective. I did have questions about how they felt the class contributed to their development as writers and humans, but I was more interested in their perspectives and insights. I decided to use a more open-ended approach to the end of class letter writing to provide myself with the opportunity to receive a wide range of honest and personal student responses.

Since the letter writing dialogue had evolved into a major component of the course, I asked my students to end their year with what I called 'exit letters'. I asked them to write what ever they needed to write to me, given the fact that the class was going to be over in a week. I did not give them specific things to write about. In fact, I resisted answering when a few students asked what I wanted in the letter. My response was "it is your letter, write what you need to". I wanted to let them know that they had

ownership over the contents of the letter and the freedom to say whatever they wanted to say to me.

In reporting their growth, I decided to avoid categories that might label their changes in self image, which would be a nice match to the “inadequate”, “worthless”, “powerless”, “isolated” or “unlovable” categories of self images that I discussed in the earlier chapter. However, my students’ growth, experiences, and lives don’t fit in nice neat little categories any more. Those first labels that I used earlier in this work were place holders and starting points for describing the critical issues of self my students faced. Our relationships have grown too close for less humanizing labels. Besides, the changes in their self images are theirs to name and voice not mine. The language of hope, freedom, and possibilities that they express reflects multiple dimensions of self. Hearing about their changes in their own words seems to make their growth more authentic. The categories also didn’t fit because they signify absolutes and stagnation, whereas my students were still prepared to continue growing and changing even after the class ends.

I did not get letters from Hank or Ayo, which hurt me because I wanted to continue my dialogue with all of my students. However, I did see them both at graduation. Hank wanted to exchange telephone numbers so he could email me his letter and other poems, and Ayo just laughed and said “Aw man, you know the class was tight.” I just gave him an extended handshake and wished him luck. He was right, I did think the class was a success for both teacher and students, but didn’t know it was a success until after reading the letters his classmates wrote.

Desi Chose Freedom and Self Expression

Of all the letters, Desi's letter deeply impacted me. It was the most emotionally powerful for me. I also chose to focus on her letter here because in her letter she covered the major themes that ran through the other students' letters. Students wrote about improvements in their writing, improvements in themselves, the need to take the class with them in life, and my teaching style and personality as instruments of those transformations. My major goals across all the responses were to give thanks, to show what I learned from them, and to continue to provide opportunities for reflection, growth, and empowerment by encouraging the hope, freedom, and possibility they now saw for themselves.

Recall that in the beginning of the class, Desi viewed herself as powerless at home, in school, and over the outcome of her life. She saw the world around her as fixed and hopeless, and felt that happiness was a false concept. She saw herself as worthless. Prior to this class, she saw very little point in living out her life in the society she detested and had tried to escape this life both physically by suicide and escape mentally by isolating herself in the beginning of the class. In her letter below, I was struck by the absence of the bitterness, anger, frustration, and skepticism that plagued Desi for so long. Instead, she replaced them with the language of hope, freedom, and possibility.

Dear Mr. Daniel

I wondered after signing up would the creative writing class really allow me to be creative on my terms? Allow me to write and express myself however I pleased to do so? Would my thoughts and basically myself be accepted or would I merely be ridiculed for contemplating the narcissistic idea of being a writer? I was looking forward to criticizing how the course would be run. I had already stereotyped it to be something that English teachers thought up to teach the extents of grammar, style, prose, imagery, diction, and tone in a "creative" setting. Creative meaning that they would hand out prompts telling you to write about prelisted topics such as nature, family, friends, or school, in short story form, or comedy, or fantasy, or non-fictional diatribe about inconsequential crap like the first day of kindergarten, or even the first time setting foot

into the penitentiary sweetly and innocently called high school. I pictured the respectable but downright curriculum glued boring white older lady feverishly handing out “stick to the script” writing assignments. Teachers to me are soulless people who like puppets repeat meaningless words to students from the curriculum of course to try and make sense and educate the student. I don’t appreciate teachers because I haven’t found one that would teach me something not only appropriate for the sake of academia but for my life. Thus, I don’t compliment teachers- ever. I didn’t anticipate being taught by the most remarkable, intelligent, absolute honest teacher I’d ever met in my life. Obviously that person is you. And I mean every word, no longer am I being sarcastic, instead truthful.

The words you have written me have made me feel special. It made me realize this class that hid behind the mask of the educational title Advanced Composition wasn’t merely a class, but a stepping stool for life, a valid learning environment, a place where I not only learned about myself, but was allowed to learn about and understand others, and most importantly a place to grow, and space to do so. I was in a class where I was free. I could talk and write about my feelings- all my feelings- without being contained. I was allowed to write about whatever I desired and that meant a lot to me. Lack of freedom has been depressing. I feel as if I’m soaring through the sky, happy, floating, and content. Free from the reservations that real life imposes on a person. This class was just what I needed to get through (alive) my senior year of high school, just what I needed to confront the rest of my ever confusing life.

My life has just begun, with many thanks to you Mr. Daniel. I am no longer the contained, angry, teenager who cries ritually at night. I haven’t cried at night in at least a month, and before this class I did it daily. I can now transfer my emotions and feelings onto paper without hesitation or fear of what people will think. I’m trying to be just as good a writer and person as you are. In a way, you are my role model. I’m not trying to be cheesy.

Thank you for letting me borrow your confidence. I generally have very low self esteem and confidence, but with your help I’ve been able to overcome certain aspects of my life that I overlooked, perhaps because I wholeheartedly believed I couldn’t do anything about them. I believed I had to succumb to my parents’ every whim; I believed that my parents and others were far more important than me. You taught me to believe in myself, and to believe in my writing, and to live life without indecision, and a lack of confidence. You showed me that human beings are capable of being good human beings, even when I believed that all human beings were out to get me. Thank you for letting me be and feel like a writer. Thank you for considering my work worthwhile to read and constructively criticize. I am going to miss walking into your room the freedom chamber of high school. The one room always open for anyone, to say, write, do and risk anything without trepidation. Thank you for giving me the courage to keep writing. Thank you for letting us into your life, and thank you for wanting to enter and explore ours. Not many adults have ever wanted to learn about me, to take time and understand the real me, not the image, nor the color, nor the culture that I physically represent. For that I am most grateful. You have brought out my soul, and now I feel it is my job to continue to nourish and protect it. I need to keep going, to keep pursuing my dreams instead of placing them aside because of things or people that will or have come in my way. I have learned to express myself, to continue, to keep going, to live, and to survive. Thank you for teaching the class this way, thank you for letting us breathe.

Sincerely & gratefully, Desi.

At the beginning of the class, Desi was an angry, alienated, skeptic, primarily because she felt powerless in school. As a result, Desi came to the class ready to criticize the course and the teacher. She used to be so pessimistic that the only power she wielded was to sit back and scoff at the world for believing that things like change and happiness were possible. In her letter, she revealed her beliefs that school could be a “valid learning environment” and a teacher could be “a remarkable person”. This new found hope may serve her well as she enters college next year where she need to exercise more of her power.

The same girl who felt worthless, constructed in part through the way her parents had been treating her, now said that she “feel(s) special”. She attributed this new feeling of self worth to the “words” that I wrote to her. She let me know that my expressions of love for students mattered in their lives. She felt special because one teacher engaged in a year long dialogue of love and critical thought about her life. Imagine if all of her teachers did the same thing for her throughout her educational career?

The same Desi, who argued that school and life were an unchangeable waste of time, now argues that freedom is possible in school because she experienced it in my class. I think she learned that when she chose freedom and self expression she avoided the depression she chose to let devour her in life. In this classroom, she learned that her life was not ending, but had “just begun”. Desi has helped articulate a key to her version of freedom, empowerment, self love, love, and understanding of self through critical literacy. I believe that students must experience these things in their lives for them to enter their realities and alter them. The power of experience must be recognized.

The girl who used to sit alone crying every night is “soaring through the sky, happy, floating and content”. It is quite amazing to hear her use the word happy to describe herself, when the word use to be a “fake” word the delusional people spoke of. The girl who tried to kill herself made it through her last year of high school alive, seemingly because of a poetry class. The term ‘poetry class’ had become an understatement. The class and her poetry writing was a weapon to “confront the rest of her ever confusing life,” which implies she will continue to use what she learned in the future. Poetry class came to mean freedom. Poetry class came to mean she was special and mattered in this world. Poetry class became the place where she could redefine herself and remove the angry teenager label she had adopted for herself. Poetry class was the place where she could breathe and the place where she could survive.

Finally, the girl who believed she had low self esteem, a lack of confidence, and “wholeheartedly” believed she was powerless to change her life, is now talking about believing and having confidence in herself and her writing. She chose to express herself and found that through her writing and reflecting change and hope are possible, which have provided some freedom from her disempowered state at the beginning of the class.

Hearing Desi articulate this new image of self as a special being upon which the beginnings of her life were to be built is a powerful and important transformation that I was fortunate enough to bare witness. Of course, I felt a sense of pride that she was able to “borrow my confidence” as she called it, and that I could help her make the transformation she made. I do know and believe that I played a major role in the process. I do not think acknowledging that fact makes me egotistical. I do feel good about helping her, but I balance this feeling with the understanding that I did not do everything for Desi.

As much credit as she gives to me, I must give her the same credit in return because we were partners in this process. I do not and refuse to be seen as the figure that stands upon high and saves the meek. Part of the reason Desi's letter credits me so much is because it was her 'thank you letter'. She was thanking me for the experience in which she got to re-examine herself, not for doing all of these things for her.

It was so important for me to communicate this to Desi so that she understood that I was not solely responsible for the transformation that she experiences because I believe that if she gives me all the credit, then everything we worked might diminish. If I was the catalyst and then I was gone, what would Desi be left with in my absence? No, I could not afford for her to leave my class with this potential misunderstanding possible. Her letter prompted me to respond and emphasize this point. She had to see that she had at least an equal role and actually a more vital role in her transformation than I had. The following letter was written to Desi and handed to her after a tearful embrace at her graduation ceremony. It was my last official attempt to use dialogue to empower my friend. I was hoping after reading my letter she would see her own agency.

Desi

"First, you are special. I am so interested in how your life is going to turn out and if you will get to be you. I sure hope so because you are wonderful, so don't let ANYONE in this world talk or force you out of being you.

Your words meant a lot to me, and I will admit I did get a tear. You are a tough audience. In some many ways you, with all your negativity and skepticism about school and teachers forcing their information and ways upon students, were the ideal student for this class. When I wrote the first piece for the study, I described the type of student who needed the class. I described a student who felt alienated, disempowered, a lack of ownership, and that school was not a place for them and their ideas. My argument was that given a creative writing class, taught in a new way, that students like you would not only come to life, but reconnect with their own lives and school. The first step in the process was getting you all to understand that this class was not like "school" as you knew it. I had to break down all of your negative associations with class and school first in order to reach you. Hearing you (a student looking forward to criticizing another topic, prompt, stereotype driven writing class) say that the class wasn't merely a class really let me know I had succeeded. I felt even prouder when you said that a good class and teacher teach things that can be used in life after high school. You have very high and appropriate standards and I am glad I did not let you down.

I love that you saw I wasn't one of those curriculum glued teachers you despise, but the funny thing is I was curriculum glued. The curriculum was you, your classmates, their writing, and their issues. I just went where you all led me. I just had a different idea about what curriculum is. You also give me credit for my honesty, but again I just don't know any other way to be with students.

I am also glad you felt free in class. Just remember, I did not free you, I don't have that power. You freed yourself! I gave you a safe, loving space to be you and you had the courage to take advantage. You made the most of your time. You wrote and explored you. You gave yourself the ability to make through high school and through life. Your writing and honesty gave you the gift of caring about Desi. I saw my role as being your partner, who was always there to hold your hand during the scary parts. Thanks for allowing me to be by your side.

When you said I was like a role model, it was a scary compliment. I felt pressure to continue to give all that I could to students. I don't want to let you down. O.k. the line that got me was the thanks for letting me borrow your confidence. In so many ways I knew with you I had to stay strong, even when you would lash out and attack me. I always felt deep down you were just testing me to see if I would cut you loose like so many others have done. I will never leave your corner. If you want to repay me for my confidence, then do one thing. Make the confidence your own. Take it with you in all you do. Love and cherish all of your thoughts, feelings, and desires. Have the confidence to know that who you are and what you want is just as important as anyone else's needs in this world. You were right it is your job to nourish your soul from now on. Oh, technically it is two things, never stop writing. Well, actually three, stay in touch throughout life (you have my email).

You helped me understand one other thing. I used to talk so much about multicultural education, social justice, and about what black students needed, but you showed me what it was really was all about when you wrote about me learning about you, not just an image, class, culture or color. You are right. The basic key to education is about humanity. It is simply (actually not simply) that a teacher cares enough to learn about, connect to, and grows with students. It takes a lot of time and desire to want to do this, but you have shown that it may be the only way to make a difference in education. My hopes on becoming a better teacher lie in the ability to establish relationships like ours with as many students as possible. I know I can't do this with every kid, which makes me feel awful and ashamed in myself and the school system, but I will try. Thanks for allowing me this opportunity to learn about a great young woman.

I need to tell you again that I love you and I am always going to be wondering if you are out there loving yourself and giving the world hell for not being sane, and anytime someone out there doesn't love and respect you (the beautiful, critical thinking pistol, who learned to love herself in high school of all places)."

Avoiding the Disempowering Thank You

This correspondence between Desi and me provides insight into the transformation that she experienced during the class. It also provides a backdrop to the ensuing discussion that analyzes my role as a teacher in this critical literacy classroom. The letter brings out a theme of power and agency in relation to who receives credit for the transformations and learning that takes place in my classroom.

I define a disempowering thank you as one that implies that one person must be thanked because they saved another person who was unable to save themselves. A disempowering thank you is one where the student does not see the importance of their role in the learning process. The teacher is viewed as a savior or as the all knowing figure who imparted wisdom to students. This type of thank you is problematic for me because it stands in direct opposition to issues of freedom, empowerment, possibility and hope. The power (responsibility for the change in students), when given solely to the teacher, leaves the student powerless. I do not want any of my students, and these students in particular, to feel powerless. My students must see that they were not passive recipients, but active participants in the learning process. It was our dialogue not my monologue that was responsible for our mutual growth.

Prior to my experiences with these students, I saw no potential problem with the end of the year thank you cards, gifts, and notes students have given me over the years. However, for these students who did not see themselves as powerful or change agents, the thank you became problematic. The thank you letter became yet another teachable moment for empowerment. I worked so hard to help them see themselves as powerful that I could not allow the class to end with them not understanding the roles we each played in their growth processes.

As a result, the emphasis in my letter to Desi was placed on Desi and what she did by the repetition of the word “you”. I kept using the affirmative statements to reinforce her role in her transformation. The most important of those statements is when I argue that I did not free her, rather she freed herself. She had to understand that no one else has the power to enslave or free her; the power to do either lies within her own mind.

Remember Desi once saw herself as powerless, so I could not let her slip back into that frame of thinking by assigning power to me that was rightfully hers. My final act as her teacher was to give her back the credit and the power she tried to give me. I was not being self deprecating, I was creating an opportunity for empowerment by allowing my student the space to realize that she played a tremendous role in her growth and that she could take credit for that role. Desi's thank you in this case had the potential to be disempowering and I was going to do my best to prevent this from happening.

The next tactic I used was to use Desi's own words to open up possibilities for critical reflection like I had done in so many of the dialogic letters I wrote in the class. If she borrowed my confidence, then I needed a way to help her see the confidence as her own and not mine. I gave her the charge of remaining confident in herself and loving herself in the future. This was to help her see that she had agency and that she could carry on without me if she wanted to and was brave enough. Yes, I realize this was a bit of a guilt trip, but if I can guilt a student into loving themselves, then it is a necessary evil. Since she saw writing as her vehicle to confront her life, I gave her the charge of continuing to use that vehicle. She talked about being cheesy, but I meant the last charge with all my heart, which was for her to stay in touch. She thanked me for wanting to get to know her, but I was equally thankful that she wanted me to know her and that she wanted to know me. The relationship I formed with Desi is my role model for how I want to be with all of my students. She taught me that transformation is possible as long as there is a nurturing relationship between teacher and student. I cared about her so much that I did not want my ego and personal need to hear that I helped my students get in the way of making sure she knew that she had helped herself and had the power to

continue to do so throughout her life. My relationship with Desi was similar to so many other students in the class that I ran into the disempowering thank you dilemma in several other letters. This theme of power and agency helped me to find the language I needed to define myself as teacher.

Students and a Sense of Agency

Before the class started, many students had expectations of me from what they had heard around school. According to Peggy, I did have a reputation in the school. “I didn’t know you but your reputation definitely preceded you: you were a great teacher, completely insane and hilarious, and you made students realize their potential. This year you lived up to all that, and I’m immensely glad that I was given the chance to be in your class.” Peggy once saw herself as worthless, but at the end of this class she has begun to talk about reaching her potential. The significance is that to have potential means that you have to be worth something. Peggy, who would never write about herself, actually began to see herself as a worthwhile topic for exploration in her poetry. She actually began to use “I” in her poetry, which she would not do before in her voyeuristic style of poetry she had been writing. Peggy became just as valuable and interesting as all those other lives she was pondering and exploring in her writing. Peggy made the choice to validate her self and her life experiences by viewing them as worthy of further thought and exploration in her writing.

What Peggy helped me see about myself was part of my teaching process. I first learn about my students and over time come to love them. My next step was to push them to learn about themselves, in order for them to develop their own critical consciousness as a result of our dialogues about their poetry and lives. Finally, as Peggy

noticed, I push students to reach a potential that they might not even be able to see themselves. Peggy in turn helped me see that the final step in the process was me taking a critical look at myself as teacher and recognizing my potential as a teacher. The challenge in this process was helping students understand that I am not responsible for them reaching their potential. I believe that they are the ones who achieved their potential. I understand my role in the process was to continually speak the language of possibility through loving dialogue, to facilitate their movement from possibility to actualization of their agency.

An example of me trying to promote this image of myself as an advocate for student agency came after reading Mark's letter where he noticed a change in his writing because "Before (HE) came to this class (his) poems had weird pointless titles, for weird pointless poems. You helped me evolve as a writer." My response to Mark was simply a final affirmation of what he saw in himself now not what he saw in me. I wrote to him:

"You did and do have points to make in your poetry, it was just that you were not spending enough time crafting and working on your poems with a reader and audience in mind. You were only writing for you before and since you understood your poem, you felt no need to work on it and revise. I am glad I got the chance to be in your audience. I am glad that you cared enough about me and your classmates to try to help us understand your poetry. You now seem to be reaching people. I think you also reached yourself."

Helping Mark is an example of what they as students call my ability to help them evolve as writers. There is a fine line between accepting praise in education for what students learn, and believing that you somehow poured knowledge into this empty vessel. My firm rejection of the notion that student as blank slate philosophy helps me reiterate that it is students who make meaning in the process of learning, which is why I made it a point to emphasize to him that it was his effort, his will, his drive that improved his writing the most not my ability to comment on his poetry. It is so important for me to

have my students understand that it is because of their active involvement in their own learning that they emerged as more powerful, critical, and reflective writers. I tried very hard not to be viewed as the stereotypical patriarch who from up high gives gifts of knowledge to people. The power and credit they give me, I simply return to them because it was theirs all along. In so many ways, this group of students needed to realize they owned the power to change more than most students I have encountered. Realization of their agency gives them the power to change and transform and provides them with limitless potential.

In Mark's case, he really needed to see that it was his hard work and not my intelligence that helped him. He started the class believing that he was isolated and that no one understood him or his writing. It was not going to do him much good if he believed that he was only understood by a super intelligent teacher. I had to let Mark know that it was he who helped me understand him. He had the power through his writing and revisions of his poetry to express himself to the world and have the world understand him. He was understood in our classroom and with each poem he shared with us, he got to feel less isolated because he was understood and accepted by our literary community. He had a place where the isolated self image did not exist for him any more. This experience may help him extend this sense of community with others he encounters in life once he shares his poetry and engages in dialogue with his readers.

I think Sondra saw understood this concept of each student having the power and agency in their own transformations very well. In her final letter, she wrote

"With your help, I wrote honestly about things that I wouldn't write about before. You helped me write words all spiffy-like. Good job. But, I still had to do it myself. I had to write the words down, and hand them to you and your little "I-thought-you-said-you-couldn't-write-about-that" smirk."

She knew that I was only pushing her and she had the power within herself to change. I gave her credit for her insight when I responded to her letter.

“Sondra I also think your letter got to the heart of what I was trying to do in this class. You were right; I did push and prod, challenge and annoy you to write about the issues that I saw troubling you. But you were even more accurate when you said “I still had to do it myself”. I think we had a nice partnership, I was sending in the signals and giving you the comfort and courage to go for it, but you had to get in there and fight. You were the one who did all of the really hard work. You are the one who transformed. Since you understand our process so well, maybe you can push yourself more, call yourself on your bullshit, write the things down you are resisting, and respecting this new Sondra. You ask who is going to push you and piss you off until you do something about the things bothering you in the future and the best answer is YOU ARE!”

In my letter to Sondra, I am trying to reaffirm a concept that the power is in the students. As fragile as Sondra entered this class, I believed she could not afford to leave this class with the notion that she could just ‘give up’ since I am not in her life to push her to write about and challenge herself. That seems very disempowering because she would leave class with a ready made excuse to give up. I was trying to help her understand she is the key to her own growth not me. I am proud that I helped provide her with a process (her writing) which allows her to do it herself from now on. Sondra also wrote in her letter that she “no longer felt that everyone was smarter than her and that she had to doubt herself at every turn anymore”. Sondra, who felt so inadequate before, wrote in a line of poetry “I am beautiful, I am not fake”. She also wrote “I have been rejuvenated, I am happy, I am blessed, I am lucky, I don’t see myself as tentatively joyous, and I have the ability to stay happy”. My comments to her at the end of those poems echo my comments in the letter above. I wrote on her poem “tap into these feelings. Where did they come from? How can you hold on to them? Do you have the courage to trusts these new feelings and experience them so they can’t ever escape you again in doubt”. I was trying to emphasize that Sondra has the ability to change her self

image and I was trying to push and challenge her to accept that reality by experiencing it for her self. I wanted her to see that she did have the power to live differently and see herself differently, if she had the courage to live differently by experiencing her new beliefs without doubting them and dooming them in her mind.

Susan also needed to see that the power and the key to transformation of self were in her and not me or the class. The class was simply a catalyst to unleash her power. She explained in her letter that:

“My poetry has taught me so much about myself. Before this class I was scared to write poetry because writing those feelings down on paper meant that I was admitting that I had those feelings and problems. I thought I was the only one with problems like parents who fought all the time, so no one who understand if I ever shared. After I read the poem about my parents I was so relieved. I felt a weight had been lifted off my shoulders because I was no longer carrying the burden of the secret alone. I felt that same poem with every poem I wrote this year. At some points throughout the year when I thought I was going to breakdown, writing my feelings and venting through poetry really helped me stay sane. There have been so many times when I’ve said to myself “I shouldn’t be feeling this way, this is stupid.” This class has helped me realize that I’ve been stupid for thinking this way because my feelings are not dumb and if something bothers me, then those feelings are justified. I shouldn’t deny or feel guilty about my emotions.”

The guilt about her feelings and emotions had caused Susan to suppress them and I would argue was also a suppression of self. She wrote so many poems about not being perfect and not fitting into the mold of beautiful, or smart, or a perfect daughter, that she chose to accept the view that she was imperfect and flawed. After this class gave her the freedom and the courage to voice her feelings, she argued that “poetry helped me stay sane”. She has begun to unburden herself of all the problems and negative feelings that she was keeping inside and using to believe that she was just alone and inadequate for having the problem and not being perfect and happy.

I tried to show her how she was in fact the key to her development not just the class or me by telling her *“You helped teach me that writing your ideas and feelings down really did bring those feelings to life. They were no longer thoughts, but they*

became real issues after you saw them in writing. I think it was the sight or realization of the feelings and problem on paper was the key to your development. Once you wrote, you accepted. Once you accepted, you justified and legitimized your feelings. Once you justified, you avoided depression reading aloud and sharing, which connected you to us and helped you avoid isolation or the “burden of the secret as you put it”. Once you avoided those feelings, you had the ability to confront the feelings and problems and begin to work on solutions. Once you thought of solutions, you were no longer a prisoner. Thus I think your writing did set you free and keep you “sane”, so you have to keep writing throughout your life. I am proud of your courage to express yourself. I hope you do take the things you learned in this class with you throughout life as you said. I am really worried that outside of the walls of this classroom, you all might forget about me, this class, each other, your growth, and what writing poetry did for you. I did have high hopes that this class would be more than just a “class”. Your letter helped me understand and trust that this experience was more than a class because you see a use for it in your life after high school.”

If she can use her poetry to continue to legitimize her self, then the class truly was a success for her. The key to me is that she comes away with the belief that she and not anyone else is the determining factor now about which feelings and thoughts in her life are important and matter. This is the same lesson Desi had to learn about her parents, which was just as difficult. Neither of them knew there was nothing wrong with saying and feeling that things were not the way they should be for them to feel comfortable with themselves. They also did not realize that just their feelings alone were enough to mean things really were not acceptable. Desi and Susan came to understand that they were not just weird or inadequate because they felt the way they felt. They now seem to understand that they were entitled to have their feelings and saw themselves and their feelings as legitimate and just for the first time. Justifying and legitimizing their feelings may be the first steps they took toward justifying and legitimizing themselves and readjusting their image of self from inadequate to something as powerful as being adequate.

In each response, I simply could not allow my students to shift the power and agency in their transformations onto me. They had to see that they had the power to

make choices and through all of their writing and reflecting they transformed themselves. I believe it would undermine all that I worked for this year if they left the class believing that I had swooped in with a magic cape and saved them. I was worried about their power to make changes in their futures and if they would doubt themselves just because I am no longer around to push them and motivate them to think critically about self and make the changes in their lives that they need to make. The drive and the push to continue to grow must become internal forces in the lives of students. Realizing this fact helped me understand the importance of the empowerment piece of humanizing pedagogy.

Creating More Opportunities for Empowerment

The letters my students wrote gave me another opportunity to realize that I don't want to be a teacher who doesn't like disempowering ideas, words, and beliefs in my students lives and fails to adjust curriculum and pedagogy to address the needs of my students. In the beginning of the class and this study, I thought being sensitive to these issues was most important, but I realized that I needed to amend my beliefs. I realized after this class, and their letters that what is most important is that I am and need to always be a teacher who acts on those disempowering occurrences by challenging them and creating opportunities for empowerment. The changes they went through and wrote about in their exit letters were all very unique and personal, but they each saw the difference in themselves, which made them grateful to me. There were several students who made it a point to openly thank me for their transformations.

In Jasmine's case, she liked how *"One year of your bluntness, your honesty, and your wisdom has changed me for the better. It is amazing how much I have grown from just being in your class. You have helped me understand the world around me in a different light and accept who I am. I have learned to express my self better in writing,*

try new things in my writing, share my writing, and use writing as a healing mechanism. I was afraid to write down what I really felt, but you showed me it was the only way to feel better. All the times I cried it was because you had told me nothing but the truth and I didn't believe it before. Being in your class was a struggle, but it was exactly what I needed. I want to thank you for all the time and effort you spent making sure this person did not go to waste. Thank you for being there when I couldn't take it any more. Thank you for helping me grow since the beginning of class, and I will continue to grow because of all the wise words you have instilled in me."

I was trying to promote a sense of agency when I redirected credit to my students when they gave me credit for their writing, but in Jasmine's case, she was trying to credit me for her personal growth and so I had to try and create one final opportunity for empowerment with my comments to her in my letter. Yes I do realize that without me and this class, and the experience we shared this growth may have been delayed or never occurred, but they must see themselves at the center of the process not me. To achieve this end, I decided to reverse the thank you's for Jasmine to realize it was really about what she had the courage to do for herself.

"I have decided I am not even going to mention the girl you used to be because it is too painful to go back and think about her mentality and self knowledge. Instead, I am only going to speak to the young woman who has evolved from ashes through her writing and critical thinking about her identity, life, desires, worth, beauty, body, and her relationships with men. Thank you for believing in me and trusting me enough to write all that you had to write. Thank you for beginning to believe and trust in yourself. Thank you for seeing yourself for the first time. Thank you for realizing you are a prize. Thank you for taking ownership of your body, beauty, and sexuality. Thank you for writing great poetry and for sharing it with me and letting me push you to places you needed to go in your writing. You had the courage to write what you felt and thus you had the key to healing all along, I just made you use it. Thank you for finally taking your medicine. Thank you for becoming the type of girl I pray my sons will bring home to introduce as their future wife. Thank you for understanding why I didn't tell you good job after each poem; you saw that our goals were so much bigger than that. It was never about pleasing me (a teacher) it was always about improving you. Thank you for crying with me. Thank you for just being you. No matter what happens in this world, you know that I love you."

She had to see that she was better because of her own strength and journey through critical understanding of self, which emerged out of writing poetry and dialogue about that poetry. She is the one who has to go out there and confront a society and men

who don't always value black women. She has to understand that she has all the equipment she needs to deal with and conquer that word inside of her. Only then, do I believe that she will be able to sustain her own sense of self worth. She was like Desi in that she had low self esteem and did not believe that she was important. Leaving this class, they articulated in their letters a belief in self, so their self esteem did not come from a teacher, but from within themselves. The seriousness of this hits home for me was when Desi mentioned in her letter that these changes were enough to keep her alive. Sadly she did literally mean that. She said she "doesn't think she will try to kill herself again because she has come to understand her worth in this world". The need for these young ladies to love themselves cannot be overlooked or underemphasized. Without my efforts to create opportunities for empowerment, I am not sure I would have been sensitive enough to push them in their writing toward this type of self acceptance and understanding, which altered and saved their lives. Without their belief that they had the power to continue growing on their own, they might end up regressing later in life. I hoped that my comments to them about their role in the recreation of self process created a sense of power within them to draw from when needed during their lives after our class ended.

Mary's change was more subtle and surprising than Jasmine's because as she says *"It was obvious I was one of the quiet ones of the class, but it has to be one of my favorite, if not my favorite class that I've ever taken. The class was a great breather for bad mornings. Whenever I came to school on the verge of tears or wanting to break something, the classes made me feel better. From your talks with the class, and individual talks, I suppose I learned more than I could through any other idle class where we do worksheets. It would not have been half as much fun if class was done it the traditional way. Thanks for that, by the way, it helped get something more out of writing. The one thing that still sticks with me was the hating and loving yourself conversation. The whole year I'd been changing mostly for the better, and it was that day and those conversations that made me realize how much I'd changed and how much farther I needed to go. That day put it into perspective. Because you're right, as much as I act*

like I don't hear what people say, I listen to it a lot- I always think what they'd think, what they'd want, what they'd need. But it is changing."

She too was not acknowledging her part in the process. I know that some of them chose the thank you letter format for their exit letter, but I could not let them thank me from growth they should be thanking themselves for. Again, I tried to give the power back to her by telling her

"Your letter helped me know the class was successful because getting evidence from the talkers is one thing, but evidence from the quiet ones is so valuable because it is hard to know if you are getting something from the class. I know you can't help hearing people, just remember you have to listen to it and be controlled or dictated to by their opinions. Don't let them tear you down. You also can't let your inner perfection censor cripple and shame you into writing less. Worry less about perfection and more about you."

I think she did see that her change was an ongoing process and the class was just another stepping stone, so for her I just needed to remind her that she could in fact keep on stepping past the people who were trying to trip her up in life. It was the same lesson that Desi had to learn, which was instead of hating yourself and getting frustrated and depressed in the face of social and adult criticism, you just continue loving, knowing and accepting your self worth and survive all of your detractors. The crying alone and often may be an important part of the grieving process (grieving for a world that isn't accepting), but after our discussions and sharing their writing they see that crying is not the end, rather a symptom or clue that alerts you that it is time for you to get up and fight for your humanity.

Marlon also learned to fight for his humanity as he demonstrated his transformation from the disempowered quiet kid who did not think he was capable of so many things because of his old school and disempowering teacher.

"This year has been a blessing being one of your students. My whole life I hated to write, probably due to my handwriting disability, old teachers who told me I wasn't ever going to be able to write or do anything, and being self conscious. This class

opened my mind to writing. The poems made me feel better not only in my writing, but feel better as a person. You inspired me to be an English teacher. I see the way you deal with students and it is so... I don't know how to explain it. You saved me and helped me care for and save myself."

I decided to affirm what he saw in himself as a means to provide another opportunity for him to empower himself.

"You have grown so much since I first met that shy, quiet, new kid who lacked confidence. It has been a pleasure watching you begin to turn into a man. I say begin because you still have a few areas of work to do. You need to continue to trust in your self. I think you have realized that you have potential and that you can do well academically, but I don't think you have truly bought in and given 110% of your effort to your education. You also know what the right things to do are, but for some reason you intentionally choose not to do them. You have to start doing those things you know are right. I think you have seen the light and know there is something special in you, but you have to protect your future by handling your business and making better choices in your present. Your teachings might be the only thing stopping many young black males from giving up."

Part of the process is for him to pass on whatever he thinks I have given to him. I told Mark the same thing when he said he now wanted to be an English teacher. They have the burden of offering kids something different. I know Marlon could not find the words to express what it is I do with students either, but the key is he felt it and wants to give that experience to others. I know now to tell him that one of the things the "it" has to be is space and opportunities for empowerment to take place. For Marlon to go from a kid who did not know what he wanted to be or do in life, or if he could succeed at anything on his own, to a young man who wants to provide other students with the same chance he received to grow in school is a large transformation. Marlon was one of the students who were waiting to collide with rock bottom in order to save himself because power and change were out of his hands. Now he sees that the power to "care for and save himself" is within him. There is no greater image I could have wished for Marlon than this image he has now, which is the image of self as savior. I just hope he can

provide some of his students with opportunities for empowerment, so that they too can save themselves.

Student Centered Teaching: A Transformed View

This section examines how my students' letters helped me better understand the concept of student centered education. I had always liked the term and believed as long as I kept students' ideas central to the learning process and made the information in the curriculum guide relevant to their lives, I was doing enough. What I now realize is that the curriculum was still at the center of education and not my students. I use an excerpt from Susan's letter to help explain my emerging understanding.

Susan's letter also pointed out another thing that made me a different teacher. It was clear that aside from improving their writing something else more profound happened in my class: they improved themselves. Many students like Susan never had an opportunity for their lives to be at the center of a class, so the concept made her believe that the class wasn't a writing class at all. Inherent in her belief about school was the idea that learning about self was not the primary role of a class. Her growth in a student centered classroom challenged her concept of school and may help to challenge the traditional concept of school and what student centered teaching can mean.

She argued "I think you should change the title of the class to self help because we wrote, but I think I learned more about myself through writing than I did about being a writer. Our discussions throughout the year truly helped me feel more secure about myself. I know what love is to me and it doesn't matter what others think. I've stopped rushing to question myself when someone tells me I'm wrong and I'm more comfortable with me. This may sound sappy but, I am eternally grateful. This has been a life changing class, and the most effective, inspirational and educational class I have ever taken and probably ever will take. I learned polynomials and facts in other classes, but this class let me learn things which I will take with me throughout the rest of my life. Thanks for being so annoying, obnoxious and caring."

Centralizing Susan and the other students in the class helped her come up with a definition of what a writer is and does that may have an important function for her throughout her life.

The list of negative things that Susan declared that she is no longer, speak to how poor her self image had been and how much healthier her self image is now. She went from feeling “insecure” to secure. She went from worrying about being loved and defining love through others to not worrying about love at all because she had a firm grasp of the concept for herself. Her attitude about love was most directly challenged during a poetry reading in which a love poem was read and we began to discuss what love was and who gets to define love society, movies, a loved one, or the individual. She went from uncomfortable with her self to comfortable. She argues she doesn’t need to question herself based on others opinions anymore because she has a better opinion of herself. When she saw herself as unlovable and flawed, she had reason to try to change herself based on what others thought. She doesn’t need to do that anymore because she has a solid foundation in the form of self love and being comfortable with who she is. Finally, Susan argued that she would take what she learned about herself through the rest of her life. I wanted her to make sure she knew what she was taking with her and learned was not the class but her, so I wrote back saying

“I am glad to see that you were able to confront so many of your fears this year. I am glad you trusted us enough to share you. I know this is a scary thought, but just imagine what would happen if you use the confidence you gained this year to confront the rest of the fears in your life and confront things head on in college? The funny thing you wrote was that you learned more about yourself this year than you did about being a better writer. I think you have missed a key point. You did become a better writer. You became a better writer because you had an infinitely deeper and more interesting subject to write about in detail than you ever had before. Susan you were the key. I think you have to admit to yourself that you are more interesting and special than you thought.”

Your experiences need to be shared to help other people justified their own feelings and self like you learned to do.”

In this letter, my main point of emphasis was that the exploration of self was the key to her better writing and her changes in her self image. The writing of self in my classroom and the growth my students experienced help me better articulate what I mean when I use the term student centered. Before this class, I just thought student centered meant putting students first. I thought it meant nothing more than asking them for relevant examples from their lives to illustrate concepts. I have a much deeper understanding after this class and listening to what helped my students transform. Being student centered means more than just getting student input, allowing student to have a say, listening to their views and opinions, and using their real life experiences as examples in the classroom. Being student centered is not about using the students to further the curriculum, make class more interesting or engaging, or to somehow validate cultures. Given my new line of thinking, critical literacy also had to be about more than using text to develop students’ critical consciousness. Student centered and critical literacy in my mind were now lived by the students.

Being a student centered teacher in my class came to mean allowing the students’ lives and experience **to be** the curriculum. Their lives were no longer tools or means to an end; their lives and the improvement of their lives became a purpose of education in my classroom. Being student centered is now about providing opportunity, hope, information, and room for empowerment to students so that they can think, reflect, adapt, change, learn and grow in the ways they need the most at a particular point in time. Teaching in a student centered framework is now about dialogue and finding enough ways to push students in their thinking and providing enough food for thought so that

they can critically reflect and make different choices in their lives. Student centered for me now means letting their human needs and problems take center stage. Those problems may be personal, factual, developmental, or any other need a child may have in school, but teachers must form close enough human relationships with students to find out those needs. Without some process in the class to get to know students at a deeper human and personal level, there can be no really student centered curriculum in my class because the students' voices and needs will not be accounted for. My process happened to be reading their poetry, dialoging with them about their poetry, writing to and for each other, and open and honest communication with people I came to love.

I want my classroom to always become a "freedom chamber" as Desi called it. I have and will let students say what they want to and more importantly need to say. I will let them ask me any question they want, and they know I will give them an honest answer. This approach in conservative school settings opens me up for all types of attacks about what is appropriate for school and what isn't. I'd rather be the adult they disclose personal things to and trust to advise them about life, because I can help them see their way to better choices by showing them all the ramifications of their current attitudes, beliefs and actions. Despite the criticism, I will continue to let my students "breathe" as Desi wrote because I have seen throughout this year what is possible once students have not only the room to breathe, but the courage to take a breath.

This class helped me find language for who I am as a teacher. Language that is more empowering for me than the disempowering language of the non traditional teacher I chose to accept as a label for myself in the past. That label was not my own and I accepted it seeing power in the fact that I was so different yet so effective for and beloved

by students that I must be doing something right. Now I see that the something right is not being afraid to express love to students because they need it so badly. I feel empowered because I see the importance of caring about students and know I matter in their lives. I feel empowered because this class, their poetry, and their letters have given me the courage to expand my new understanding of student centered teaching to my regular English classes. I have the courage to try and improve my practice because I witnessed the transformation of these particular students.

Being Critically Literate Beyond our Classroom Walls

This section highlights one of the final realizations that my students and I came to grasp. Being critically literate is something that must transcend the boundaries of a classroom and a set amount of time student and teachers spend together. The possibility of growth and learning to continue after the class ends is a goal that all of my classes in the future will aspire. Critical literacy for me now is about instilling a process for students to use to improve the rest of their lives not just to meet a set of objectives or standards within a classroom. Sondra explained this concept quite well in her exit letter, which I will examine to illustrate my new understanding.

“This is an exit letter. But I don’t want to leave and I’m not saying goodbye. Goodbye means the end, so long, have a nice life, but I am going to continue to bug you. In writing things down, in expressing myself as I do, in all of that, I eventually, finally-went through a change. I feel more confident with who I am and not afraid. I’m not full of doubt anymore, and I know I can’t allow me to be overcritical of myself. It feels good. I sound like an after school special. I’ll need to reread your other letter when I feel down on myself. It hasn’t sunken in yet that I won’t see you everyday. I don’t know what I’ll do when I have little issues to deal with. Who is going to push me and piss me off until I do something about it? Nobody? Do I really have to leave the teacher who makes me think behind? So you see I can’t say goodbye, not when there is more to learn.”

As much as I would want her to stay, reality says we must part ways as teacher and student, but because I was a learner with them in this process, there is not this

structural notion that the end of class is the end of our relationships. When growth, change, and critical understanding of the self and the world are the goals, then the class will not end. I told her

“You joked that you felt like an after school special because after all of this writing you had changed into a more confident, less fearful, less self critical and doubting woman. That is an amazing transformation! I am so proud of you and honestly grateful that you trusted me enough to explore yourself. Thank you.”

I did tell her that in fact she doesn't have to say goodbye and that it isn't goodbye, but she had to realize that she could not lean on me as a crutch. She can't just sit back and refuse to continue to change and develop her critical understanding of self because I was not there to push her. That is why I told her early that she had to push herself. She was the one, who explored herself, I was just glad SHE took me along for the ride and was gracious enough to let me steer from time to time.

This is the same pressure to extend the class to their lives I applied to Lucy, who wrote “I have found the courage and drive to write. You helped plant the seed and I couldn't be more grateful. Whatever it is I write is an amazing and therapeutic feeling.”

I responded, *“I am glad you got the therapy you needed this year and I am glad I got to share in the process as one human to another. I really wanted this class to stay with you all beyond the constraints of this building, so it does my heart good to know you have been writing more. All you have to do is embrace yourself and talents and give yourself time to write.”*

If the seed was planted for young teachers and young writers during this class, then they did in fact have to nurture themselves now. It is like Desi wrote when she spoke of the obligation she felt now they her soul had been brought out. She understood she would have to protect herself and her dreams, and more importantly this new person she had transformed into. I wanted Mark, Marlon, and Lucy to share a little bit of that obligation, which is why they were going to have to for the first time in their lives give 100% to something in their lives. I don't feel guilty about challenging them and asking them to in essence win one for the gipper because they are the ones who said I inspired

them to do these things. I am just asking that they live up to their own expectations now because their expectations have become mine.

Peggy helped me understand that the final obligation that my students have is to continue to write. She helped put what poetry was for in perspective. “Your class forced me to write poetry I wanted to get out of me, but for some reason couldn’t. Sitting down to write poetry cleared my head and gave me an outlet I didn’t even realize I needed. I learned that poetry doesn’t have to be an event, done only when inspired or struck. I know that writing doesn’t have to be perfect; it just has to be me. I come away from this class wanting to write, and I think that the best I could have hoped for.”

I told her that *“I actually can make a difference in the lives of young people. The secret seems to be going out of your way to care about them and push students like you further than you thought possible. I cringe at the words forced you to write poetry, but in school what how else can you view a teacher’s assignments. I am glad you got the chance to get everything out of you. I think you have so much more in you that you have yet to realize. I would say (actually I am going to tell you to not fear turning your powerful eye more directly to your own feelings, thoughts, needs, views, and identity). You taught me that you could look outward at the world as a means to understanding the individual. What you learned taught me that while poetry is a great starting point for emotion, and critical understanding of self, unless we transform poetry’s function there will be limitations on the power of poetry. You have given hope to all those in the class who said, I am happier now, so I have nothing to write about. Writing and poetry must grow with the individual. It isn’t something (a tool) you used to work out issues then discard, it is something for life. Like you said, it doesn’t have to be perfect; it just has to be me.”*

Adam also talked about taking the writing with him in life. “Thank you for teaching the way you did. I know all that happened between us this past year will stay with me for the rest of my life.” I told him, *“The biggest fear I have is that the class and our time together will not endure and sustain you all when life gets hard and throws challenges your way. I was so glad to see that you were willing to take the class with you for the rest of your life. You all have grown so much that you have given me more confidence in myself as a teacher. With your success, I am able to take the time we spent together with me for the rest of my life too.”*

I too know it sounds cheesy, but it is true. I think they kept saying to me how it was really true they were grateful and it wasn’t fake, even though saying it sounds cheesy, or cliché, or after school specially because you always hear about life changing

experiences, but when they happen it is hard for people to just accept that it happen and not have everyone else looking in from the outside say “yeah right”. After all, they didn’t believe me when I first compliment them because that is what teachers are supposed to do. It took time for them to believe that I actually meant it, so why should I believe them when students thank teachers all the time. I think the reason is simple, when I signed several of their letters love Mr. Daniel, they knew I actually meant it. Outside of my immediate family (3), two ex-girlfriends, my wife and two children, and maybe a two other people, I have never actually told anyone else that I love them. When teacher and student learn about self and life and grow together like we did, it is inevitable to love those individuals. I don’t feel silly or weird or inappropriate saying it to the males or females I said it to in the class because it is just a fact. I want them to have wonderful lives, I want them to love themselves, I want them to persevere in the face of social and personal adversity, I want them to write, and I do want to know what happens to them as they grow up. If I lost touch with them, I would from time to time worry that they were not o.k. and it would scare me.

For them, I will try to continue to be that anchor that they needed. Be it a courage anchor, a confidence anchor, a safety anchor, a caring anchor, a model anchor, a human anchor, a writing anchor, or a teacher anchor. I will try to fulfill these roles for the next group of students that come into my life. I will never forget how much my students are listening to what I have to say. I think I sometimes underestimate that and say some things I shouldn’t, so I will try to be better. This class has transformed me as a teacher as well. I am more confident in what I am doing. I am sure that getting to know students is essential to good teaching. I am positive that writing poetry can help students better

understand their lives and help them accept who they are with open arms, if that writing teacher allows them to write freely and knows how to motivate them, because the teacher first got them to feel safe and trust the teacher and the class. I want to extend this type of teaching to my regular English classes when we read novels. I did it a little, but I need to centralize the approach and reorganize my thoughts around the issues in the novels. I want my students in my future classes to continue to write to me after the class is over like these students have done

Like most professionals, I struggle with that concept of knowing you are a good at your craft. The most helpful grounding I received in defining myself as a teacher was from the letters my students wrote at the end of the year. For example, Lucy wrote in her exit letter “Your class was profound, inspiring, absurd, the best, etc. I don’t need to compliment it at all because I’m sure it’s as apparent to you as it is to me that the class and its teacher had a great effect on a lot of its participant. I feel privileged to have been a part of that.” Her comment echoed Ayo’s you know the class was tight comment, and Desi’s compliments about the way I taught the class.

What they didn’t realize is I did need to hear what they valued about the class and my teaching. I understand now my self image and identity did not form in isolation. My social and more intimate human contacts did contribute to an understanding of self. I realized that my students are the society I am most affected and effected by. My students are the society that I must always struggle to understand my relationship with. My students were the society in which I came to better understand myself. I told Lucy *“Thank you for the compliments about the class and my teaching methods. You are right, deep down I do know all of those things, but I don’t know it for sure and the impact I had on you as students until it comes out of your mouth or pen. Unless you tell me, I am left assuming and hoping I made a difference in your life. I don’t want to be arrogant and assume too much, nor do I want to be insecure and assume too little. It is very tough, but when students like you who are skeptical and strong critical thinkers about life and school say they were inspired I have enough fuel to sustain me and my teaching approach for years. The highest compliment you paid was when you said “I am glad I have finally met a teacher who might just be human, and finally a class that wasn’t just standardized bullshit.”*

After Desi and Lucy made sure to emphasize the human side of me as a teacher, it helped me focus in on a critical aspect to my teaching and myself: I must continue to attempt to implement humanizing pedagogy, which humanizes both teacher and student in my classrooms. My students appreciated that I opened up and shared my values and personality with them and that I wanted to learn about and understand the complexities of their identities. Lucy's letter helped me clarify who I am as a teacher because before this class, I would not have articulated the importance of humanizing pedagogy in my view of myself as a teacher. I am sure that a form of humanizing pedagogy was always in me, but this class and their letters helped me bring that view of myself to surface and more importantly onto this page as a proclamation of who I am. This class helped me understand that recognition of students' humanity and finding ways to validate their humanity and come to know them as humans are center of my practice. I am a humanizing teacher.

CHAPTER VIII

Conclusion:

Towards an Understanding of Humanizing Pedagogy in the Poetry Classroom

This chapter explores the theory and practice of the humanizing Pedagogy in my classroom. It was only through the experiences of practice and action research, that I was able to articulate the meaning of a humanizing pedagogy in a writing workshop. It was through using poems as a vehicle for of exploration of self that I was able to understand my students and my relationship to them. I was able to make deeper meaning of alienation because I learned about my students' particular forms of alienation, which moved me from an abstract concept to a real classroom challenge. I came to understand that student identity is a complex issue that must be understood as a process over time. In the same way, I developed an understanding of critical literacy not as a set of principles to layer over curriculum, but a lived experience. I came to understand various roles I could play in students' empowerment process. I realized the value of love in teaching. I also realized that having students begin a dialogue requires teachers to make that dialogue meaningful to the course and students' critical consciousness. Finally this chapter provides insight into, research, and the practice of humanizing education.

After Alienation is Unveiled: Education Begins

As a poetry teacher, helping students to identify and name their alienation is but a first step. Merely helping students to unveil feelings of alienation is not enough; as a teacher, I had to engage them in a writing process to confront those feelings of alienation. One of my underlying assumptions prior to conducting the study was that teaching poetry using humanizing and empowering practice could help combat the alienation plaguing

the new millennium high school student. I had a general definition of the term alienation as feelings of marginalization, isolation, estrangement, apathy, detachment, and powerlessness¹²⁶. I incorrectly thought my job was to test to see if my theories about poetry as solution to alienation were accurate. Through conducting this study, I realized the important work was not theory testing, rather it was learning about the particular feelings of alienations my students faced and helping realize them and find ways to overcome those feelings. This study helped me to understand that theoretical definitions are only half of the necessary equation. The other half of the equation is the processes of teaching in particular contexts and coming to know particular students in order to contextualize theory for understanding and helping students. In my classroom, through the teaching of and dialoging about student poetry, I came to learn, for example, about Desi, who felt marginalized in school, which led to her apathy and detachment, isolated at home by her parents, which led to her feelings of powerlessness, and estranged from happiness, which led to her choice to adopt a self image of worthless and powerless. After learning about Desi, proving alienation existed in schools or poetry could help her became less important than actually helping her within the context of a poetry classroom. The distinction is that Desi and the other alienated students became the focus of the course and poetry became a vehicle to help them. Once their alienation was revealed to me, their lives were centralized and privileged in the classroom. Alienation for students is not an abstract notion or concept, rather a set of very personal and particular feelings that must be investigated further. For teachers who wish to research alienation in their own classrooms, a strong desire to come to know students in very personal and human relationships will be helpful because feelings of alienation are often private feelings that

¹²⁶Hoy 1971.

students may not share with teachers or researchers who have not attempted to or built relationships with students that move beyond traditional teacher student interaction.

Placing Humans over Art: Alienation and Poetry Instruction

When I first taught poetry, I made the mistake of putting art (the poem) ahead of the human (the poet). I thought my teaching of poetry at the University of Maryland and in my first few creative writing classes I taught at the high school level were representative of a type of freedom I aspired to as a teacher. Freedom to determine curriculum and freedom to do what “I” wanted were what I valued, but now I realize freedom in my classroom must be more than my own person freedom. I also thought that my students were free because I simply let them write about whatever they wanted and I directed my comments solely to making them better writers. I only wanted their poem to be the best and devoted myself to the poem and the words on the page. The work was more important in many ways than the student. I now realize that that sense of freedom and thinking did allow me to focus on writing and treat all students fairly, but it was missing something. I don’t think I will ever argue again that the poet and the poem are separate. I thought that the words on the page had a life all their own, but that was the idealistic poetry teacher in me talking. That was the theoretic framework of a teacher who thought that his theory about poetry was set in stone and that revising a student’s poem toward the best possible poem was enough for my students and for me as a teacher. During this study, I spent so much time coming to know my students that I realized their personal needs were more pressing than the need for a great poem to emerge. I realized the potential alienating nature of my old philosophy of teaching poetry for students. The subject matter that my students chose to relay in their poetry expressed self doubt, self

loathing, and disempowering self images, which I realized were more important to revise than merely their poetry. My students had too many identity and personal issues like fear, self esteem, confidence, feeling like they belong or matter, and trying to carve out a place for themselves in society for a teacher to privilege the text over the human. Putting the student first meant directing my comments toward troubling issues and images in their poetry in addition to helping them write more artistic poems. Because I came to love my students, I tried to do ask every critical question I could think of to help them begin to critically question their negative self image origins and their views that change was not possible for them. Humanizing pedagogy took the place of the poem and art first pedagogy I once endorsed, which helped my students growth through poetry in ways that would not have been possible. The way I reached my alienated students was human interaction around their poetry, voices, and lives. The freedom to follow students provided two opportunities for empowerment: they had the opportunity to reinvest in school and self, and I had the opportunity to learn more about what I want education to mean in my classroom, which can help me have the confidence to try to change my practice in all my classes.

Student Hope and Agency May Replace Student Alienation

As mentioned in the introduction to the study, alienation literature is full of the negatives about what happens to students who were alienated in schools. Many students disengage in school activities and courses, and engage in violent and destructive behavior¹²⁷. Many students are choosing to drop out of school rather than continue to deal with feelings of alienation.¹²⁸ My study seems to offer two major contributions.

¹²⁷ Natriello 1982.

¹²⁸ Peng 1983

First, I provide much needed research on ways to address the alienation felt by students in school, and second, the positive outcomes my students' experienced after critical reflection about feeling alienated. My class ended with students who had a sense of hope and agency. My class ended with learners who were ready to continue the act of learning, poets who wanted to continue to write, and individuals ready to continue the process of loving themselves and having a relationship with the world around them. To address feelings of alienation teachers are going to have to connect themselves to their students and centralize the students' lives and experiences within the curriculum. I did this by sharing myself with my students, coming to love them and express that love for them in my teaching, and allowed them to write about their own issues and lives, which validated their lives and helped them connect with school. I also had success sharing alternate realities with my students. Sometimes the alternate reality was born out of my own opinion, and other times they were contradictions of students' disempowered vantage point. Either way for my alienated students, the new reality had to contain hope, and possibility, so students could reflect and then chose to internalize the more empowering reality in their lives.

Fluidity of Identity must be learned

Identity literature¹²⁹ speak of fluidity in identity as if it was a given. My students problematized that given in two ways: They had to learn that their identity was fluid, and they needed time and a process by which to select new identities for themselves. To my students, identity and their self-image were not seen as givens. In fact, they were seen as static, which led to feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness for students like Jasmine and Marlon. Part of the job for teachers is to help students see that their self image is a

¹²⁹ LeCourt 2004.

fluid entity. I learned that I as a teacher must begin the empowering work of helping students realize the power to change their self image is within them. The power to choose a self image is a concept that took a lot of time for my students to believe. Teachers cannot just tell students to think differently; students learn to think differently over time and by experiencing difference within our classrooms and relationships between teacher and student. After years of internalization of negative views of self, students need a myriad of experiences thinking critically about self to provide them with a foundation to begin to test new identities and make positive changes. One such experience can be the writing of poetry in a humanizing classroom. I also could not make the mistake of supplying my students with an image of self that I thought they should have. I could only challenge their negative self-images by pointing out the disempowering nature of their current self-images and offering possibilities for them to reflected on and make choices.

The second problem my student raised with the fluidity of identity was once identity was seen as fluid, it still takes a tremendous amount of reflection, writing, and experience before my students could select new images for themselves. They needed time to form, name, accept, validate, and test their new images out in society. Many of my students feared changing the image they had of themselves because at least their social world tolerated the image they had, and they had learned to cope and merely survive the world around them. There was a lot of risk involved in changing image of self because the new image could be rejected by society. What pushed my students past this fear was the fact they were ready to reject the negative image they had of themselves and that need outweighed their fears of social rejection. The love of self drove them to adopt images of self that they could not just survive with but become empowered by. Further research is

needed to understand the difficulties involved in selecting new self-images that are more powerful for students. My work is only one step in understanding the process, but the writing of self and dialogue about self proved to be important steps in the process for other to consider employing in their classrooms.

Prioritizing Understanding of Self: Humanizing Critical Literacy

Dealing with critical issues of self and society as they emerged in the everyday work of my class made critical literacy natural and meaningful for me because the activities of critical literacy were the curriculum. Prior to this class, I thought critical literacy was an artificial lens I'd place over curriculum. When planning the class, and understanding critical literacy theories, I had placed too much emphasis on setting up and providing the critical text and learning opportunity. Critical literacy demands that students "question sources, look for assumptions, and read for intentions, not just facts and transform {information} for a new purpose."¹³⁰ I thought that I was going to select a student's poem and then have my students perform an act of critical literacy on the text. In other words, I just viewed critical literacy as a method or tool for reading. From this class, I saw that critical literacy allows these opportunities to emerge naturally from the students' dialogue and their texts.

To better understand critical literacy took me realizing that the teacher's agenda was not the key, but the communal (teacher and student) agendas and individual student lives were the key to critical literacy. The natural need for critical literacy in the lives of my students and their attempts to examine their negative self images made critical literacy a part of who I am as a teacher. It is no longer a strategy or theory to employ, but a way of being and thinking in the classroom. It is a set of principles, thoughts and

¹³⁰ Flowers et al. 1990 page 21.

actions that came to have meaning in the specific context of my class and within relationships between my students and myself. I understand now, that being critically literate in this class meant having the ability to read, question, understand, and change the self. In my next class, the tenants of critical literacy will remain, but I must be open to a new definition of what it means to be critically literate in that room based on the lives of my next set of students. I learned that theory in general is not fixed, but fluent and contingent on the particular lives of the students in my classroom.

Critical Literacy in Conjunction with Humanizing Pedagogy

Though I still argue and agree with Lensmire¹³¹ that a teacher cannot be neutral in the classroom, I was slightly mistaken in my argument at the beginning of this study that critical literacy was the “best” non-neutral role for me as a teacher to take in a creative writing workshop to promote student growth and development. In order to aid students in their critical understanding of self, I needed other theories to fill in one of the missing gaps in critical literacy theory. The first gap was that I understood critical literacy involved critical thinking about self, but I learned that it was difficult and ongoing task on the part of the teacher to be able to push students in their critical understanding of self. In order to facilitate students in the critical understanding of self, I had to make an investment of time and energy into their lives, their views, and their realities. I had to develop a stance of love, which was born out of a genuine love for my students as individuals. Adopting a relationships building stance with as many students as possible has to be a companion piece any maybe the precursor to critical literacy. If I didn’t struggle to form relationships and care enough to try to know and understand my students, I don’t think I would have been sensitive enough to pick up on where and how

¹³¹ Lensmire 1994.

to push and question my students' poetry to promote critical understanding of self in their real worlds. It was through forming relationships that the trust was established to allow them to take risks and self disclose. If they didn't have confidence in me and know I really cared about them, then how could I have gotten them to write about often their most personal and intimate problems and dilemmas? I had to take the risk to make an investment of time and both physical and emotional energy to try and relate to and find avenues into their personal space, so we could become partners in the journey through critical awareness. Without this partnership between critical literacy and love, I firmly believe the social understanding of critical literacy theory is still viable, but the critical understanding of self may be limited if not impossible. Students engaging in critical literacy need a tremendous amount of support during critical reflection on self. Critical literacy theory desperately needs to directly advocate teachers forming close relationships with their students to provide the support structure necessary for critical reflection and growth. This must be an essential part of critical literacy theory if it is to move to the real lives and classrooms of teachers and alter pedagogical possibilities.

A second gap in critical literacy seems to be the issue of neutrality. If all text is political, and humans are political and potentially biased, then how are teachers supposed to manage the text and their own underpinnings? As a Critical Literacy teacher, I came to understand that to be non-neutral as a teacher can mean staring out neutral. I found that I didn't have to bring up my own issues and critical agenda; I had to be neutral and wait for opportunities that arose out of my students' poetry. Then, and only then was it time for me to begin to challenge ideas because as a person and learner, I too was thinking critically during the discussions. The most important thing I did during these discussions

of my students' poetry was to battle against views that I felt were harmful to my students' images of self. Most frequently, they were the fatalistic, pessimistic, hopeless, fear driven, attitudes, which all served as excuses not to take action or worse as barriers to seeing any possible action to take in their lives. I was not setting up and providing the critical text and learning opportunity; I was allowing these opportunities to emerge naturally from my students. Dealing with critical issues of self and society as they emerged in the everyday work of the class made more sense for me as a teacher. It did however require a degree of faith. I had to believe that the students' texts and lives were rich enough to provide enough opportunities for critical enlightenment. They were. Critical literacy then for me is a tool for teachers to become more sensitive to issues of self and society when the students' need it, rather than an imposing reform sledge hammer to used on all curriculum and students at all times.

A third gap in critical literacy is that having learners critically understand themselves and their relationship to society is too broad. Understanding the self in relations to society, needs to be conceptualized as all forms of social setting rather than just society at large. My understandings of critical literacy changed when I learned that the critical social issues relevant in my classroom went well beyond race, class, gender, ethnicity, and religion for high school students. I went into the study thinking about these issues intensely and social change as the key to critical literacy. Critical literacy for me now has to focus more on the individual and their critical understanding of self within the context of their particular social interactions, which may include social groups, family dynamics, school communities, or society at large. The primary hurdle in my students' young lives was learning who they were and more importantly how to accept and love

who they were despite the social cues to the contrary. Their critical understanding of self had to come very early in the process, so that as complete individuals they could then begin thinking about social change. My students had to work through and free themselves from their own struggles before I could expect them to make larger social changes. The need for the personal was even stronger for my students given their reality of a lack of social power at sixteen and seventeen years old and in school. Adult learners are in a better social position for the immediate social changes that critical literacy can provoke through critical thought and awareness, but teachers will have to slow down when it comes to young adults. Not that social change is impossible for young people because my students did accomplish some through their magazine, but personal change may have to be the true measure of critical literacy success for high school students.

I learned critical literacy was more about letting them and helping them name their own troubles and in my class writing and dialoguing about those troubles in order to move toward change. If their personal growth is the measure and their developing understanding of self the process, then the troubles, dilemmas and oppressions they face can no longer be the universal evils but the personal. My job was not to guide them through issues of racism, the “white man”, other forms of discrimination and issues of disempowerment as I thought it was coming into the study. I learned that my job was to help them unveil their own personal oppressors. To the individual student it could be a mom, dad, guardian, teacher, school, or their own fears, insecurities, beliefs, or self concept. One key battle was their natural cynicism and my efforts to help them see the possibility something better actually existing if they had the courage to go after it. Another key battle was the fact that many of my students did not see themselves as worth

exploration. How can critical literacy be effective when a child sees no point in reflecting on a worthless self? Lack of self love has the power to cripple critical literacy efforts, which is why I had to spend so much energy helping students see that they were important, loveable, and that their lives were worth not only my time and energy but their own.

Necessity of expressing love in teaching

This study cemented the idea that as a teacher, I cannot be distant or neutral in the lives of students. They did not need a voyeur to narrate their lives; they needed an active partner to help them think critically about their own life experiences. Distance is problematic because the necessary relationships and bonding to strengthen connections and learning cannot take place. Too many students already experience distance relationships with home and school, so closing the distance between teacher and student is essential to help students reconnect with education. Neutrality is problematic because teachers bare witness to the lives of students. Often times the lives are troubled and imposed upon by various oppressive forces like home, school, images of self, social norms, school cultures, etc. Once teacher's witness to oppressive forces in the lives of their students, the teacher must take some form of action. For many teachers that action may simply be reporting the problem to a counselor, parent, or administrator. In my case, because of the loving relationship that developed between teacher and students, I was compelled to address the problems students faced more directly by altering my curriculum and pedagogy. I did not approach the problem as a savior or any other

knightly patriarchal figure. Instead, I tried to engage the student in critical discourse about their lives situated in the context of their poetry. One of my goals was to help students see that they had the power to make choices to solve their own crises. Solving their own self-image dilemmas and other disempowering views about life and self was a key step in student empowerment, agency, and self actualization. A neutral teacher stance would not have had the same benefits for my students .

One important tension in expressing love for students and forming solidarity with them was knowing when to support or validate their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, or views of the world and self, and when to challenge them. The tension arose because my students had a great need to be heard and more importantly to be understood. Too many teacher and adults in the lives of my students were not hearing them clearly or understanding them, which led to my students giving up hope in much of the adult world. I had to establish a level of trust with my students by convincing them I understood them. Rather than judging what they said, I often repeated what I understood their views to be to make sure I they and I knew I understood them. Once I heard them and understood them, I was in a better position to push them in their critically thinking. My role was not to judge but to ask open ended questions to promote dialogue and critical reflection. I wanted them to think about their own views and develop their own thinking. By pointing out contradictions, disempowering aspects of their views, my students had the choice to re-examine their ideas in a new light. My job was to continue to offer possibilities, new visions, hope, and positive outcomes for my students to reject, accept, or assimilate into their views. The key to my success was that my students came to learn that I understood them and loved them, so my questions were not seen as criticism but as possibilities.

Expressing love for my students was a necessity for so many of them because they were not affirmed as individuals by various entities at home, in school, and in their relationships. This love I expressed for who they were helped them begin to love the self. In this study, their lack of self love had crippling effects on my students' identity, agency, belief in possibilities or hope, and feelings of alienation. The journey toward loving the self was a long and tedious process that may never fully end because as identities change, we must begin the process of loving the new identity as well. Helping students love themselves was a key factor in helping myself come to love and validate the teacher I was and wanted to be in my classroom. It was through helping students and learning from what they felt worked for them in my teaching that I was able to name myself as teacher. I had been struggling to identify what type of teacher I was and what my teaching methods and strategies were because they were not "traditional". Rather than having to accept the disempowering label of a different teacher, I am empowered by the terms humanizing, empowering, student centered teacher because they articulate my goals in education.

I also learned that talking to my students about loving themselves forced me to think about loving myself as a teacher. Part of the doubt I had about my ability to help them turned into a lack of confidence, which made me question myself as a teacher. I wasn't 100% sure about teaching through letter writing and expressing love, so I did not trust the type of teacher I was and in essence "love" that teacher self as I had been imploring them to do with their selves. I think I finally saw that we do need feedback from other people before we can complete our identity and trust it, which means in some ways our image of self is related to others' image of us. Unlike my students, however, I

had found that trust and love for so many other aspects of me that I was not willing to give up or abandon my stance, just question it.

Not just teaching poetry- we are teaching human beings

In order to make humanizing pedagogy a possibility, broaden the types of comments and questions I put on their poems. Traditional writing teacher workshop comments were concerned with editing, theme, line breaks, order, form, style, clearing up confusion and eliminating contradictions. I had to be that teacher, but I had the added task of finding critical moments or lines in their poetry that gave me avenues to push them in their critical thinking and understanding of self as well as their understanding of society and their relationship to that society. The most common strategy I used was asking them questions that shifted the focus toward themselves as individuals, which helped turn the poem into a catalyst for dialogue and personal growth. This strategy was also utilized during the poetry readings in order to move the group toward critical reflection of self and society. During the poetry readings, I had to shift away from looking solely for meaning in the poems. In fact, I tried to move them away from what the poem means as much as possible, which was not the traditional approach to interpreting poetry. Instead, our focus was on what issues the poet was trying to work through or shed light on, and how the poets words and perspective helped us conceptualize and reconceptualization our own notions about society and our own knowledge of self. The poems became vehicles for dialogue rather than just a thing to be improved. The poems were not sterile lifeless artifacts; they were life giving and affirming entities. Our focus was not just on fixing poems, it was on fixing ourselves. In order to do this, I had to avoid playing the role as the dominant patriarch of the

workshop, who set the standard for good poetry for all to conform to. Though I could not totally avoid the role because I was the teacher, male, and facilitating the discussions, I choose to take any authority or power that translated into and pass it on to my students.

The other change I had to make to my comments on student poetry was going beyond the traditional sandwich comments (a positive, needs for improvement, a positive) that English teachers usually make. There isn't anything wrong with that model, provided the teacher knows when to break from it. This class and the lofty goals of critical understanding of self and empowerment required me to break from that mold. The praise wasn't essential because I did not want them writing to please me or to receive praise from me; I wanted them writing for themselves. So much of the work I tried to do in my classroom was about transferring ownership over to my students. The teacher, though by default and ironically is, could not be the central focus in the class. I had to try to move my students' personal agendas to the front and my own agendas to the rear. I had to follow them on their journeys rather than try to lead them down my or any other curricular pre-selected path.

The ownership piece is important because it helps to combat issues of alienation and marginalization experienced in other parts of their school and home lives. The ownership also was important for issues of empowerment and students becoming change agents. The editing and comments on literary merit go with the territory of teaching writing, so my effectiveness in that area was necessary to establish my credibility as a teacher. The encouragement at the end, I used to push them toward critical thinking and to explore topics they may have not had the courage to explore until now. This was my space to point out new topics that arose from their poems, and to show them an issue that

may be unresolved in the current poem and needed future attention. In short, this was my time to have an influence on the invention stage of the writing process. This process was challenging and was not possible for every single poem the students turned in. Rather, it was up to me to get to know my students well enough, to find and be sensitive to the critical moments when they did surface in their poetry. I had to let their writing guide me to where they needed to go as critical thinkers and growing individuals. Thus, much of this study will be the unveiling of the process for other teachers to follow by looking at comments made on student poetry, analyzing the logic behind my comments, and observing the changes that took place for my student as a result of the comments on and dialogue about their poetry.

A New Purpose for Poetry

The act of writing became the catalyst for social and personal change. The writing and voicing of self became the means for empowerment. Audre Lorde's theory about poetry not being a luxury but a necessity was a seminal theory for me in my understanding of the purpose of poetry. Poetry has transformative power by helping the silenced and oppressed end their silences and build bridges to others suffering from similar afflictions in order to move toward change. The amendment I would like to add to Lorde's theory is that the humanizing poetry class is also a necessity. Too often poetry has been taught in dehumanizing ways that silence the poet who had the courage to end their silences. If poetry is to have the power Lorde argues, then the environment that poetry enters must be an environment that loves and nurtures the poet and their poem rather than doing any further harm. My students needed all dimensions of humanizing pedagogy to bring justice to them and their poetry. They needed someone to read and

understand both their words and their selves then love both. They needed the critical questioning of their poetry to help them better understand the self and their relationship to society. They desperately needed the loving dialogue that sustained them throughout the year. They needed the disempowering ideas, images, and beliefs to be pointed out to them in their poetry so that they could critically reflect on them and grow toward a more empowered state. The humanizing poetry workshop provides the social setting for the bridges and connections between humans can be made. I shutter to think what may have happened to my students images of and love of self if they did not have a safe place to face their fears and move forward. The humanizing poetry workshop is not a luxury because far too few exist; it is a rarity that must be cherished and duplicated by teachers who have read this model I have made available.

Dialogue: Let's talk

Asking students to express their thoughts, views, and beliefs will quickly become pointless in the minds of students if teachers do not act on those utterances. Prior to this study, I advocated dialogue in the classroom. I only thought of dialogue in terms of students having a safe space and the opportunity to express themselves. I thought the most important part of dialogue was the students getting to speak and end teacher monologues, which can dominate classrooms and devalue learners. After hearing my students express themselves in poetry and discussion about their poetry, I quickly realized student expression was only one step in the process. The more important step is what do I do with student discourse once it has been uttered? In my class, acting on student voices meant first hearing and listening intently to those voices, followed by attempts to understand their perspectives, then asking questions which I believed would

help them begin to question and engage in critical reflection about their perceptions (if negative or disempowering) in an effort to help them make changes in their own lives. Finally, I shared my own perspectives with my students and tried to grow along with them. The keys are that student voices once solicited by teachers are heard, validated, and then made essential to the curriculum and the consciousness of the teacher. The comments I wrote to students in the margins and bottom of their poems, as well as the dialogic letter became my vehicle to show students that I heard them, validated and questions their views and grew closer to my students. The dialogic letter also became a vehicle for teacher and student to develop relationships. Writing back and forth allowed me to become a friend, a mentor, a listener, a coach, a sounding board, a fellow explorer, a risk taker, a safety net, a nurturer, a motivator, which gave me a better sense of the roles teachers needed to play in order to have real human interactions with students. Dialogue then is an ongoing, reflective process that can help us become more human when the dialogue helps us become critically literate about self and our relationship to society.

Empowerment as Process

For my high school students the scope of oppression and change had to be widened from the traditional social forces I anticipated prior to the study. Oppressive forces for my students were other teachers, administrators, parents, their belief systems, and school itself. The personal oppressive forces in the lives of students are just as vital to them as other forms of oppression that are more familiar like sexism, racism, etc. Rather than social change, the liberating action for my students became personal change. Critics of Freire¹³² may become less critical if they understand that oppressive forces are the students to name and to change, which would stop teachers from waiting for students

¹³² Ellsworth 1989.

to make tremendous social changes. Teachers and theorist concerned with empowerment and liberation must not assume they know how a student is feeling oppressed. Allowing their oppressions to emerge from student concerns and experience makes the work of liberation more authentic and immediate for that student. It was not until my students began to write their live and experiences through their poetry that I began to understand their dilemmas through the acts of reading their world and dialogue. Their writing of self was the first step in their empowerment process.

After the emergence of oppression, the next step in the empowerment process was the critical dialogue around my students' poetry, which voiced their views of self and the world. One of the biggest ways I found I could help my students was to challenge their disempowering language, images, and beliefs expressed in their poems or during class discussions. My challenge did not empower them; empowerment came from their choice to also challenge these notions in their own thought processes and having the power to reject disempowering notions related to their own lives. They had the agency in the process of naming and accepting self. The realization of their power is what took so much time and energy because it is very difficult for the powerless to acknowledge their power or control without having experienced them. I can recall mistakenly thinking that just telling my students they were beautiful, or had choices, or the ability to be themselves despite their parents, was enough to make a difference. I do believe my continued affirmation of my students served as a catalyst to start them thinking about the possibility of change. Once the seed for hope and possibility was sewn, they had the burden of tending the seed while I nurtured them. In my class, through their writing and dialogue,

my students choose to have this experience. It was the lived experience that was the significant part of the empowerment process.

Another step in the empowerment process for my students was the action phase where they began to see themselves differently. They began to articulate these different views through their poetry and letters to me. A key role for me in this phase was to avoid trying to name their transformations. I used student poetry and their direct statements as evidence of their new images of self.

Action Research

Researching my classroom helped me define what type of teacher I am. The close reading and analysis of my students' perceptions and explanations of how various aspects of my personality, style, and practices benefited them enabled me to name myself. My students' quests to develop positive self images forced me to also consider my image as a teacher and find the language to express myself that I found to be empowering for the rest of my teaching career. Engaging in this process also helped me take ownership of the various theories I was reading. I had a strong affinity to critical literacy and liberation theories, but I did not have a complete understanding of them because I had never experienced them. This study gave me the opportunity to make meaning and then share my theoretical understandings with the research community. I thought I was going to use my practice to test and prove the possibility of theory but that would not have given me ownership. I would have only been able to say that someone else's theories worked or did not work for my students. By using practice to make meaning of theory, I learned the more important lesson that theory can be meaningful in the lives of teachers once they own it through practice, critical reflection, and meaning making. In the meaning making

spirit, I must share my emerging understandings of action research. I learned that while social justice is a major component of action research, human development may need to be a better umbrella for action research. Humanizing research includes issues of social justice, issues of forming loving relationships, dialogue, empowerment, and development individuals. If being fully human guides action researchers in the future, then the social and personal can be addressed.

Action research is a necessity for my professional, personal, and human development. This study helped me understand that I did not have to have all the right answers in my classroom. Teaching was about the willingness to continue to adapt and strategies to come up with possible answers that can benefit the students in my care. Researching my teaching gave me an avenue to have the courage to try new things in my classroom because my students and their poetry seemed to demand these changes of me. For example, the dialogic letter was invented because I knew my students needed much more personal, critical, and in depth feedback than the space at the bottom of their poems provided us. The dialogic letter was a new strategy that I had the courage to try because I knew that I would also be reflecting and analyzing each letter and student response to ensure that I was helping my students grow as writers and humans. I learned that it was the letter, but the use and purpose of the letter that became part of my pedagogy. The dialogic letter became a tool in the process for a relationship building dialogue also geared at critical understanding. I realized how valuable the letters were in my classroom because I was analyzing and studying them as the class was progressing. This knowledge I gained gave me the confidence to make other adjustments in my teaching that I thought would help my students. I always had a fail safe if my attempts caused problems because

I was actively engaged in thinking about everything I was doing in the classroom. Action research helped me make curriculum fluid and flexible to student needs rather than stagnant and potentially insensitive to student needs.

The process of engaging in action research (analyzing transcripts from the taped lessons, searching for themes, reflecting on what students were writing and saying, as well as the types of comments I was making and my rationale for those comments) drew me closer to my students' lives and experiences. I became even more invested in them because I was thinking about them so much more than I normally would have been if I was not conducting research. Taking their poetry, letters, and taped voices home with me every night caused me to begin to love my students. Researching them pushed me beyond normal teacher student interaction to relationship building and love because their lives mattered so much to me after thinking critically about those lives for hours at a time after the work day. Researching them made me a little paranoid about misrepresenting them or misunderstanding them, so I tried even harder to come to know them and understand their perspectives. In doing this, I too had to open myself to them so that we could have a relationship rather than a researcher and subject association. Research as a means to form loving human connection with students must be continued in education. This type humanizing research may be the best argument yet for smaller class sizes because teachers may not be able to develop loving relationships to oversized classes.

Implications

Teachers who would like to engage in humanizing pedagogy must be willing to follow their students, build curriculum around student needs, and enter into open and loving dialogue with students, so that both student and teacher can improve their lives.

While English, Social Studies, and Creative Writing, lend themselves to dialogue, a humanizing pedagogy can be used in other disciplines. Any time students are asked to journal, or respond to text can be an opportunity to engage students in a humanizing dialogue. The frequency of the responses may be lower, but the quality of the response must be present in order to begin the relationship building and humanizing process.

Using verbal and written dialogue to interact with students required a great deal of time. Schools would be wise to lower class sizes to enable teachers to engage students in a humanizing pedagogy. This study only had 15 participants, and I have recently exchanged dialogic letter and prose responses with sixty students in two out of five of my regular English class. Schools should not ask teachers to try and respond to so many students; this prevents all students from getting the chance to benefit. Smaller class sizes will enable humanizing teachers to connect with more students hopefully decreasing student alienation.

Humanizing Pedagogy would be an excellent framework for professional developers to revise mentor programs. Allowing a new teacher and their mentor to engage in open critical dialogue to better understand themselves as teachers and teachers within a curriculum, school, and county would help the two teachers grow together over the course of a year. The often sterile mentor relationship can be humanized. Once young teachers are introduced to a humanizing educational process, it will be easier for those teachers to develop a humanizing pedagogy in their classrooms.

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