

Enriching the Curriculum - Reflections

Rawatee Maharaj-Sharma

I remember the day I met my first group of students in the capacity of a teacher as if it was just yesterday. It was a cold, windy Thursday morning in winter. My first teaching appointment was at York University in Toronto and for me this was a great opportunity to display my knowledge and skills.

That morning, as I sat savouring my morning tea I watched the news. The major story dominating the news was about a nine-year-old child who had been viciously raped and murdered and her body chopped into several pieces, stashed in bags, and hidden in various places in a park in downtown Toronto. As I showered and dressed I kept my eyes glued to the television, finding it very difficult to believe what I was hearing and seeing.

Throughout the day the events described in the news reports lingered in my mind in a very disturbing way, and I wondered how it would impact on my composure in the classroom on my very first day as a teacher.

From the little I knew about teaching at that time, I was aware of how important it was to make classroom learning relevant and current, and I debated whether I should use the troubling incident in my teaching. I knew that while science, to a large extent, is concerned with delivering a body of knowledge to students, it also involves provoking students to think logically and critically about real issues in the world and to interrogate the implications of such issues for their own lives.

As I stood before my first batch of students, I had to confront the struggle that teachers face in their efforts to effectively deliver instruction to students. On that day I chose to ignore the events of the news as I felt that it had no place in my pre-set plan. I realized some time later that the current issues of the day could have added not only valuable content to the lesson but also meaningful and relevant affect.

After several years of (science) teaching, I realized that the decision I took on that first day was unsatisfactory and unrealistic. A teacher cannot leave the “real world” outside the classroom because it is the “real world” to which we belong. The world—its current events, its history, and its future—is not an idea or notion that can be separated from the classroom. Racial and religious discord and issues of sexual and national identities all manifest themselves in our classrooms and on the ways we understand the past and anticipate the future. The “outside” factors can very often assume pivotal control in shaping the learning process we engage our students in, and as teachers we need to consciously provide a controlled space for the “outside world” in our classrooms.

In science, many topical current issues, including pollution, reproductivity, and genetic modification, naturally form part of the curricula delivered to students. When these issues are brought into focus through current events, if infused into classroom learning, they can positively influence the learning dynamics of the classroom. Issues surrounding debatable topics such as homosexuality, reproductive rights, and energy conservation are some

areas that could provide students with opportunities to struggle with their own identities and ideologies through structured, non-threatening discussions.

Some (within and outside of the teaching profession) may suggest that such issues are personal and students may find it difficult to talk about them in a classroom setting. However, I have found that as time passes and students grow more comfortable with the teacher, they often expose their own personal beliefs and experiences without feeling intimidated or compelled. Some students even welcome the opportunity to talk about such issues in an informal setting.

There was an incident that occurred in a science class [in Canada] that really brought the point to life. The class was about the reproductive rights of women. A discussion began and some students suggested that some women have babies just to get more Baby Bonus [an allowance given by the state to assist financially challenged parents]. In response to statements like these I deferred to the course text and explained that those who need it should not be stigmatized. One student approached me and asked if I would let her respond to the peer comments on the next day of class. I agreed.

The next day she came to class with a beer can in her hand and a cigarette, and stood at the classroom door and yelled “Sammy, Sammy” repeatedly, then ranted to the class: “That little bastard.... he’s off doing something again...I’m going to kick his little....” She then sat down at the front of the class and said, “that is what many of you think women who get Baby Bonus are like...” She explained that, as a teenage mother, she was able to attend school and care for her child because of Baby Bonus. As she shared the reality of her existence, the questions and comments from the students changed and the class learned something. I learned something too—that we can always **give more room** in the classroom.

One thing that I have realized is that the diversity of the student population in any class is but a subset of the world outside—that this diversity is one of the greatest strengths we as teachers have in the classroom. As teachers we need to encourage all students to recognize and explore these differences (among themselves) in relation to the discipline we teach. We must remember that while it is good for students to know that you are passionate about a discipline that it is equally important that they know that you are not totally bound by its constraints. We must find ways to allow the “outside world” to permeate our lessons without flooding its structure, and as we move closer to our goal of professional teaching we must remember that the “outside world” exists in the very world of the classroom.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine