

Teaching as an Act of Problem-Posing: A Collective Call to Action

by Sarah Cacicio and Uyen Uyen Le

Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation.¹

Without a doubt, the movement toward corporatized, standardized, and even sanitized education models in K-12 education impacts the way students at the higher education level view teaching and learning. New York City public school teachers have been trained to focus entirely on measurable outcomes. Writing is taught as a well-structured paragraph with an introductory sentence, three supporting details, and summarizing conclusion as opposed to a platform for communicating important thoughts and ideas. Learning has become a product, rather than process for students and teachers alike.² I have come to believe that my City University of New York students' experience as pre-service and in-service teachers in an outcomes-oriented schooling environment, where they seemingly have no say, directly impacts their experience as learners in my graduate classroom.³

This realization called me to action; I resolved to design a midterm project that would engage students in a real, meaningful process of inquiry and creative transformation. The goal was to reinvigorate learning as a process of question-

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ing that leads to change in knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and even attitudes.⁴ I approached this project with the understanding that change unfolds slowly and over time, but has a lasting impression on how students (and in this case, teachers) think and act. I hoped the assignment would motivate K-12 teachers to take back their profession as educators rather than deliverers of pre-packaged, scripted, Common Core-aligned curriculum.

The following article examines the learning process involved in designing, assigning, and inevitably, assessing the problems posed by the midterm project. In an effort to promote learning and writing as a social practice, I asked one of

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my students, Uyen Uyen Le, to document her experience and co-write this piece, and she accepted with enthusiasm. Uyen's story is essential in reevaluating how higher educators define, promote, and measure student learning in the context of corporate-based K-12 education models.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF TEACHER EDUCATION: WHAT HAPPENED TO LEARNING?

The 2001 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, commonly known as No Child Left Behind, remapped the landscape for K-12 public education in the U.S., creating a national industry of standards-based curriculum and assessments. The legislation mandates that all schools and districts measure and report their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for all students. Nevertheless it was up to individual states to define AYP and to create an evaluation model for measuring outcomes. New York responded to federal mandates using a backward-design approach, starting with the implementation of high-stakes assessments to determine AYP, followed by the movement toward statewide curriculum standards now known as the NYS P-12 Common Core Learning Standards. During the last 10 years, statewide English language arts and math assessments have been used to determine both grade promotion and teacher effectiveness.⁵ As education historian and activist Diane Ravitch notes, the movement toward standards stimulated the creation of for-profit vendors for public curriculum and assessments.⁶ Districts began to purchase pre-fabricated, one-size-fits-all curriculum resources and assessment tools. Over time, instructional models grew to resemble corporate business models, with schools and teachers fighting to achieve the highest outcomes for their students.

In September 2012, I was hired as an adjunct lecturer to teach Foundations of Bilingual Education at The Hunter College School of Education, City University of New York. During my first semester, I received a standing ovation for what could be described as an extempore, Freire-inspired speech on teaching as a political act. As I recall, it ended with me yelling “Don’t get angry, get informed!” to a room full of first-year bilingual teachers, most of whom had been advised by their school administration to use English-only practices for bilingual content-area instruction. At that time, I believed that research-based teaching practices could trump top-down state curriculum standards. However, in less than two years, the

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standards movement greatly impacted the experience of public school teachers, and consequently, my role as a teacher educator. We now find ourselves caught between teaching as a political act and teaching as an act of alignment.

Effective spring 2014, all K-12 teacher candidates in New York are required to take and pass the edTPA, a performance-based teacher assessment. Given that the majority of my students are pre-service bilingual and TESOL [Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages] teachers, I am required to align my curriculum to the edTPA, addressing the five dimensions of teaching: planning, instruction, assessment, analysis of teacher effectiveness, and academic language development. Supporters of the edTPA believe that it will improve teacher education.⁷ As Sawchuk poignantly notes, however, debates around the edTPA “illuminate a long-standing tension within teacher preparation: whether there is a core body of knowledge and skills every preparation program should convey—or whether, as proponents of ‘critical pedagogy’ theory assert, a program’s primary duty is to help candidates question traditional education policies and structures that purportedly contribute to inequities.”⁸ In addition to aligning my syllabus to the edTPA, I am also responsible for assigning key assessments—faculty-developed assignments that use the same rubrics and weighting across all course sections—plus submitting student work samples and performance scores at the end of each semester. Many of the key assessments require pre-service teachers and in-service teachers to create and carry out Common Core-aligned lesson plans. While I value setting clear, high expectations for teachers-in-training, I still believe it is my obligation as an educator to uproot the status quo, embrace the messy, pose real problems, and come up with real solutions. The greatest challenge I face is getting my students to join me in this process.



Milkweed, a painting, is by Lorena Salcedo-Watson, a visiting artist at Stony Brook University. For more, visit www.lorenasalcedowatson.com.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: CREATE YOUR OWN LEARNING OBJECTIVE

For the midterm, I asked students to create and present a spoken, visual, or written essay, reflecting on their understanding of any new concept or idea related to our field of bilingual education. There was no required format apart from a list of works cited. I explained that it was necessary to look closely at one particular concept or idea to see, reflect on, and articulate an understanding of the larger socio-cultural, historical, political, and academic forces that have shaped the broader concept of bilingual education and, in turn, their experience as teachers. The idea for the project was based on Ambrose's assertion that how students organize knowledge influences how they learn and apply what they know—how those pieces are arranged and connected in an individual's mind. I encouraged my students to dis-assemble all of the parts and reassemble them in a way that made sense to their own experience and understanding. I wanted them to generate ideas about bilingual education. Nevertheless as I described this deconstructive/constructive process, my students grew visibly frustrated. Inevitably, one student raised her

hand and asked, “but how will you grade us?” I came to understand that my students expect absolute clarity when it comes to assessment and resist the nebulous, difficult, often painful experience of learning, that is, actively generating new ideas.

Hansen states that ideas remain ideas only if they are dynamic and subject to change. When they harden or become routine, as all too many do, they lose their vitality and take on the passive aspect of facts and information.¹⁰ I envisioned my students exploring freely and directing their own learning, but in reality, the lack of guidelines frustrated them. They demanded clearer examples and descriptions. They preferred facts and information.

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The collective resistance to the midterm project seemed to affirm the need for its existence. We started over. This time, I provided class time for my students to generate ideas by reflecting on their own life experiences as bilingual individuals, and drawing deeper connections to the literature. I agreed to share the work of a former student who had explored the concept of “codeswitching,” a common practice of using two languages simultaneously. To make visible the negative connotations often associated with codeswitching, the student had created a brochure for the “treatment” of codeswitching. She used research to support that codeswitching is actually a sign of mastery of two languages, and that misconceptions stem from deep social and power relations.¹¹

Seeing a sample allowed them to better grasp the purpose of the project. Slowly they stopped asking for explicit guidelines and started to follow their own questioning. I received countless e-mails from students telling me about their ideas and requesting feedback—we were finally collaborating! When it came time to present the projects, it was amazing to observe how the creative and reflective process had unfolded and informed their thinking. For two class sessions, I listened, observed, and learned from my students’ perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of foundational concepts in bilingual education. None of the learning interactions were clearly measurable, and yet the outcomes far exceeded the expectations I could have set. One student in particular exemplified the process of inquiry and creative transformation, pushing us to see the relationship between language, identity, and history in a completely new light.

In an exploration of “language shift,” Uyen Uyen Le created and presented a timeline that traced the language practices of her family over the course of four generations. It started with the story of Uyen’s grandparents who spoke French in Vietnam and ended remarkably with the developing language practices of Uyen’s

own son who she considered at risk for losing his heritage language. When Uyen presented her timeline to the class, the room fell speechless. She had taught us to look at the concept of language shift through her lens as a first-generation Vietnamese-American. Through hearing Uyen's experience, we were all reminded why this work matters; we learned to see how language shift impacts the lives and experiences of our first- and second-generation students here in New York City. But how did Uyen come to reflect on and teach us about language shift? What learning process did she undergo to generate such original and profound ideas? I felt this was something I needed to understand more clearly as a teacher. The fol-

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lowing section illustrates the midterm reflection process from Uyen's point of view.

ENGAGING IN INQUIRY AND CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION: UYEN UYEN LE'S STORY

As an 8th-grade teacher in a New York City public school, I value creative thinking from my students, yet I am often surprised and disappointed when they push back. It was not until I encountered Sarah's midterm reflection assignment that I understood the origin of their resistance. The assignment, probably not much different from the open-ended projects I prefer to assign to my own 8th grade students, created anxiety for my classmates and me. The assignment description was brief and frustratingly vague, although I did appreciate the power to choose my own topic. Immediately, I knew I wanted to explore the idea of language shift, which can be defined as the loss of language through economic, political, cultural, social, and technological change.¹² I felt such a personal connection to this concept and decided to create a family tree to illustrate how language shift had occurred in my family from Vietnam to the U.S.

As a first-generation Vietnamese-American, my language identity has been a source of both embarrassment and pride, owing to both external and internal factors. The theory of language shift seemed to be able to help me understand these conflicting feelings. Once I started arranging my family tree, however, I realized it was an insufficient and superficial representation of what happened. It didn't tell the whole story, I thought. Then I got stuck. I got frustrated. I considered abandoning my idea to write an essay instead, but for reasons I cannot articulate, I kept going.

It seemed that my classmates had also reached similar impasses with their own projects. We spent a good portion of one class trying to figure out more precisely what Sarah wanted from us. When we requested more detailed guidelines, Sarah

said we were free to create our own, but she would not revise the assignment. Near mutiny ensued; and the anxiety and the confusion around the project were palpable. We asked to see past projects, and she reluctantly showed us a brochure on codeswitching that helped to an extent. Sarah explained the rationale behind not showing us past projects—that seeing others’ work might inhibit our own thinking. Sarah wanted blue-sky thinking, creative, critical, and uninhibited.

I returned to my family tree, disheartened that I would have to abandon this topic because I would not be able to do it justice. On top of this, I had spoken to a classmate who told me she was also planning on using a family tree to illustrate

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language loss in her family. This bothered me; I was not thinking blue sky. I was trapped under a blanket of clouds. Finally, I decided to e-mail Sarah about my idea. She encouraged me to continue with my thinking, writing:

You will be able to discuss inter-generational language shift as well as factors that affect these changes, such as occupation, violence, and immigration. Further, it is so important for us, as educators of minoritized language populations, to understand our own history and relationship to language, albeit complicated and often painful. I encourage you to explore your past, present, and future understanding of language, and how this exploration affects your role as a teacher of language-minoritized youth.¹³

I realized that I was going in the right direction, but these words confirmed that I would need to recalibrate the way I was thinking about language shift.

I continued with the family tree, but started to see that there was so much more to the picture than language shift within my family. I referred to Sarah’s e-mail not as a checklist, but as a reminder that I was exploring something much bigger than my experience and the experience of my family. My family tree turned into a personal timeline, then a family timeline, and ultimately, a collective historical timeline. I spent time with my mother on the phone, asking her questions I might never have asked. I spent more time researching the complicated history of colonial Vietnam. The amount of actual time it took to create the timeline was not substantial, but I did spend a lot of time thinking, refining, and transforming my ideas. What started as a basic understanding and interpretation of language shift quickly became a creative, transformative process that has since informed my teaching philosophy and pedagogical practices.

Freire summarizes the process of transformation that I underwent in complet-

ing this project, writing:

[A]s [students] are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, [they] will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understanding; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed.¹⁴

Digging further into family history has helped me consider how to approach teaching English to language-minoritized youth. Wherever possible, my goal is to dig deeper into my students' family histories as a means to examine the greater sociopolitical context of their language learning. I want to work to understand how their own language histories and identities have shaped their attitudes, and those of their parents, towards learning language and encourage them to take ownership of their affiliations "with a different language community."¹⁵ English is the language of schooling and, therefore, the language of power. Choice has everything to do with power and I want to give my students as much choice as I can to empower them and to motivate them intrinsically.

MEASURING OUTCOMES OF INQUIRY AND CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION

Uyen's final project is a testament to the fact that problem-posing education can and does produce real, measurable, and significant learning outcomes. In this case, the end results did align with the initial goals of the assignment. By looking closely at one particular theory or concept, Uyen and her teaching colleagues learned to question and generate ideas about the larger sociocultural, historical, political, and academic forces that have shaped bilingual education. My students experienced firsthand the profound impact of inquiry-based learning even at the graduate school level.

As Uyen and I can attest, there is no place more important than teacher education programs for inquiry-based learning. If teacher education programs perpetuate product-based demonstrations as knowledge, teachers will in turn, continue to value and promote standardized assessment-based practices. However, if pre-service and in-service teachers are engaged in critical pedagogical practices, they will learn to value and promote learning as an active process in their own classrooms.

As Hansen, poignantly states, it is indispensable for educators to grasp fully why ideas differ from facts and information. If they do not do so, they will have no intellectual basis upon which to criticize curriculum and assessment policies that privilege the mastery of fact over the development of genuine thinking.¹⁶ As higher educators, it is imperative that we consider the outsourcing of the nation's curriculum and the movement toward standardization as a threat to the process of learning, and to the generation of new ideas. Teaching is indeed a political act; it is the vocation of breaking down and challenging policies that perpetuate inequality in and outside of the classroom. At every level, teaching is the act of posing real

problems in a way that stimulates not only reflection, but also action upon reality. Learning is a dynamic, active, transformative process that cannot be contained, packaged, delivered or commodified. Market-based education reformers cannot put a price on the generation of ideas for generations to come. My fellow educators and I will make sure of it. 

ENDNOTES

1. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 84.
2. Ambrose, *How Learning Works: Seven Research Based Principles for Smart Teaching*, p. 2. As an example of how sanitized education has become, note that it is now common practice for elementary-aged students in New York City to keep their grade-level texts in a Ziploc bag
3. Pre-service refers to the education and training provided to student teachers before they have undertaken any teaching, while in-service refers to those already employed as teachers.
4. Ambrose, *op cit*.
5. Note that New York City Department of Education Chancellor Carmen Fariña took a step toward lessening the consequences of high-stakes tests on April 9, 2014, by announcing that grade promotion would no longer be determined primarily by student performance in standardized state exams. The change reflects Mayor Bill de Blasio's administrations first attempts to follow through on promises to lessen reliance in city schools on state exams.
6. Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, p. 17.
7. It is important to note that the edTPA has been opposed by CUNY's faculty union, the Professional Staff Congress; United University Professions, the union of State University of New York faculty and staff; and New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). NYSUT reached an agreement with the N.Y. State Education Department to delay full implementation of the edTPA until June 30, 2015 (<http://psc-cuny.org>).
8. Sawchuk, "Performance-Based Test for Teachers Rolls Out."
9. Ambrose, *op cit*.
10. Hansen, *Ethical Visions of Education: Philosophies in Practice*, p. 3.
11. King and Fogle, "Raising Bilingual Children: Common Parental Concerns and Current Research."
12. Baker, *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*.
13. The authors use the term "minoritized" to reflect languages that lose value or prestige as they come into contact with more dominant languages and cultures. We reject the term "minority" to describe languages and their respective speakers.
14. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 81.
15. Baker, *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, p. 128.
16. Hansen, *Ethical Visions of Education*, p. 3.

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