

*The following contains two entries: one being an essay that I wrote back at the start of my praxis project, and the other being my current response to what I wrote then. I write this way because I find great personal value in visiting and revisiting what I have previously written. It is a space for my past self to affirm and challenge the thinking of my present self and vice-versa. I feel that my perspective has grown and changed greatly within the year that separates these two entries, just as I have grown and changed greatly, and I want my Theories of Understanding to be a reflection of this. My ways of understanding, after all, have changed and will continue to change again and again throughout the rest of my life.*

Will Mckeon

Sarah Michaels

CYES 290 Praxis Design Seminar

3 March 2021

Identity and Trust

“Don’t worry about him, he doesn’t care,” Caleb says to his friend, indicating towards me, as he jostles him around in the corner. I stay silent. I shouldn’t have. I know what he meant, but that message, “he doesn’t care,” needed dispelling, and I was hesitating.

If Caleb had said, “He doesn’t care that we’re playing around right now,” then he’d be entirely correct. As a college sophomore observing the class, it isn’t my position to be a disciplinarian, nor do I really want to admonish anyone in the classroom. I’ve seen them for a few weeks now, and I know that the two are close friends. That was just how they interacted, and it was before the class had started so it wasn’t like they were taking away from the class at all. But that’s not what he said. “He doesn’t care.” I think in my head, *“Of course I care! I may not care about this, but I care about you guys. I may not have been here for long, but I see you guys in class every Wednesday and Friday, and it makes me happy to see when you guys are learning and engaging or even just talking and being happy. I’m here to learn about schools and teachers, but I’m also here because I really like being in this class and I want to see how you guys grow and want to help with that in any way I can. It may be hard to believe since I mostly sit at this desk over here in the corner, but it’s true. I know what you meant, and yes, I don’t care about you guys playing around right now, but I do care about you guys.”* I think this, but I don’t say it. I

stay silent, unsure of whether or not I should say this, unsure of whether to put myself in this space like that, and in an instant the moment passes. Class starts, and I miss my chance to react to Caleb's statement.

Would they believe me anyway? I probably wouldn't if I were them. It's around the fourth week of observing in their class at this point, and I still don't know everyone's names yet. While some students do engage with me when I ask them if they need help with any of their work, and while some like to talk with me, the vast majority do not. I can't blame them. To them, I'm probably just a white dude that sits in the back of the class, someone that doesn't know them or their lives, someone who just sits and watches and every once in a while does a round of "can I help you with anything?" I know from seeing these students that they're a close-knit group. I know from their teacher that the group is wary of outsiders and slow to trust, and that many do not like to talk, especially many of the Spanish-speaking students, out of fear of being judged. Yet there are moments that arise in this class where I can counteract this, moments where I can say to them, *"I know that you guys don't think I care, I know that you guys are wary of me, and that's okay. I don't want any of you to feel like you have to talk to me more if you don't want to or anything like that. But I want to tell you that I see you and I hear you and I respect you, and while I'm here for a class, I'm also here because I really want to be, because it makes me really happy to see you guys in class. I care about you guys."* Just like that moment with Caleb, however, I don't say it. Would they have believed me if I did? And if I did say that, would it really be for their benefit or for mine?

I don't like to define myself by social anxiety, but I've found that nonetheless I often do. It's minimizing to do so, but it is nonetheless true that it permeates many aspects of my life. While I can say that I am proud of how far I have come through all of my life, and I am proud of the fact that I don't let it stop me from doing what I want to do, there are moments where I hinder myself, moments like these where I have an opportunity to put myself out there and say something only to think too much, fear too much and say nothing. I feel it is important, however, that I look at not just how I feel in situations such as the one described above, but why I feel a certain way.

Looking back on this moment in class, I can see that my position as an outsider (as well as my awareness of the students' perception of me as an outsider) caused a rift that I did not truly acknowledge within myself before that experience, nor did I authentically attempt to bridge that

rift. In most ways, I was an outsider. I am a white man from a small-town area who has never not been part of the dominant culture, and I was heading into a class full of black and brown students, students who had lived in a city and whose cultures were very different from my own. I knew this, and I knew that I had to do something about my assumptions, whatever that meant, but I had no idea how to authentically handle this and build the relationships that I wanted to with these students. Going into this class, both myself and those students went in with perceptions of the other, and I made little effort to acknowledge this within myself and have that actively change how I interacted with the students. I remember being told by the teacher of that class that I would be seen as an outsider, that students might be wary of engaging with me, that many would perhaps make the assumption that I would not care to be there. At the time, I told myself that I hesitated to engage with these students because I was afraid of pushing them, of perhaps making a non-Native English speaker uncomfortable by talking with them too much or asking to see a student's work when they might be afraid to show me. This was true: I didn't want to make these students uncomfortable. This was also an excuse. It was an excuse to sit back and pass things off to the more-trusted teacher. It was an excuse for me to stop engaging, to do little more than my usual rounds of "hey do you need help with anything?" It was an excuse to talk to only the students that talked to me, to the ones that made me feel more comfortable. Though I truly did want to work more with these other students, it was an excuse for me to not actually do any of the work myself.

I think I desired this excuse based on the assumptions that I had made about these students. If they had assumed that I did not care about them, then I had also assumed that they did not care about me. I assumed that many of them would not appreciate engaging with me because of my position as an outsider, and I let that assumption stop me from engaging with many of them. I was always excited and happy when a student said "yeah, could you help me with this?" I was always excited when a student made the effort to engage with me, when they wanted to know how my day was or wanted to ask for my opinion on something. I was always excited to hear the students share these things too. Alternatively, I was always scared to talk to the ones that did not engage with me that same way. If they weren't excited to talk to me, then what would they think of me if I was always in their faces? Would they see me as someone pestering them while they were just trying to do their work or talk to their friends? Would they be annoyed that this stranger was trying to talk to them when they might not be comfortable

talking? No matter what the thought was, it made me cautious to approach, and that meant that, in times where I could have made a deeper relationship with the students, I didn't. No matter whether the assumption was true or not, I had made it. I don't think I realized it at the time, but I had fully put the burden of building a relationship onto the students.

When it comes to my current project, I have been thinking a lot about trust. When it comes to the discussions that I want to have in my group, I realize that valuable work will come only if powerful trust exists. Too often I think of trust within the context of "how do I act so that my students can trust me? What can I do to earn their trust?" Upon reflecting on this moment and writing this, I have realized that it is I who has to put my trust in them. The English teacher that I am partnered with has been talking with me a lot about trust lately, and she emphasizes that the best thing I can do is put myself fully forward so that they can see that I trust them and that I care. In order to do this, I have to look past any assumption that I might make about how they feel towards me. I cannot let myself say, "they probably don't want to hear from me," and have that dictate my actions. If I do, my engagement with this group would be detached and inauthentic. I don't want that for myself and I certainly don't want that for them.

I believe that I have to keep in mind the different ways that I am an outsider in this group. I have to be wary about the fact that I might potentially bring value impositions into this class if I am not aware of how I speak. Self-identity is at the heart of my project, and I will not be able to bring a worthwhile experience to my students if I do not interrogate myself, my discussion questions and anything I might say in class to be sure that it will lead them to their own self-identification, not what I might assume their self-identification to be. With this in mind, however, I need to put my trust in these students in a way that I have never done before. I need to actively present myself to these students and share my thoughts and feelings with the trust that the students are curious, motivated people who are willing and excited to engage in our conversations. Only with this trust do I believe that I can do the work that I wish to do.

Willow McKeon

Sarah Michaels

CYES 294 Praxis Thesis Seminar

20 April 2022

Response to “Identity and Trust”

I for the most part keep the perspective that I had when I wrote this and share my past opinions here, though I'd like to add a little bit of information that I think rounds out my perspective on knowing and trusting students. Looking at this piece now, I am seeing a lack of vulnerability with myself. I mention that I think that it's important to trust my students, but trust them with what? There is something that goes unsaid here (and I might be the only reader that can pick up on this), something that I feel that I can name better now, and while this goes beyond my gender identity and expression, I think my gender might be a good way to start this conversation. I say this because my gender identity has been an important component in learning how to authentically express myself and let people know me. While I didn't know it, presenting as male in any space made it much harder to express other aspects of myself and connect with others. I think the best way for me to describe this feeling is like if you were to go into a space with a fake name. You might still walk around the room in the same way, say the same things, think the same thoughts, have the same conversations that you might otherwise have with your real name. But you're still using a name that's not yours, and somewhere in the back of your mind as you go about this hypothetical space, that name is still a role, and with that comes a form of disconnect. I hope this analogy makes my feelings a bit clearer.

During my praxis work in a 10th grade English classroom, I navigated a classroom space fully cognizant of my gender identity for the first time, while still presenting as male. As I went through the class I saw moments of student self-expression that I could identify with and connect with, but at a certain point I realized that I had done absolutely nothing throughout my praxis work to give students the same opportunity to find places to connect with me. I see knowing others as foundational to trusting others, and I gave students few opportunities to know me. This was not a conscious effort, to be clear. I think it was simply the result of me navigating a space in a way that was inauthentic for me.

I said, I see this as bigger than my gender identity, and what I'm really trying to get at here is the idea that one needs to be authentic with their students in order to form powerful relationships. I

can't count the amount of times that I've heard an educator say that you can't be fake with your students, because they'll pick up on that immediately. For me, I feel like presenting inauthentically has closed me off from student groups in a way that is subtle, but very much a present and substantial barrier. To be clear, I'm not trying to imply that every closeted trans person needs to come out to their students in order to have good and close relationships, or even that all trans people have felt this way when going through spaces as their assigned gender. What I am saying is that for me (and I speak for me alone), presenting as male meant being inauthentic with my students. It meant not being open with them, it meant not trusting them, it meant that I kept them from knowing me. I'm ready to not do that anymore.