

Acknowledging Students' voices and identities in the teaching and learning process:

How do we do it?

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Abstract

Students come to class bringing their own cultures including their own voices and identities which influence them in how they learn. Acknowledging them in teaching and learning process is very important to ensure the success in learning, and a failure to notice these will cause mismatch between students' culture and classroom culture. This mismatch may cause the students to failure, simply because the students do not learn the same way as the schools teach them. Nieto (2010) suggested that schools need to be more responsive towards the students' voices and identities that they bring into schools and tried to utilize these to maximize teaching and learning process. However, acknowledging students' voices and identities in teaching and learning process may not be easy since there may always be a doubt on the teachers' minds whether students voices will actually have positive effects in the teaching and learning process, since students often viewed as those who do not know the best way on what and how to learn.

The paper aims at reporting a case study on how an experienced teacher in a university acknowledged the students' voices and identities in the teaching and learning process. The research was carried out through observation and interviews. The description on how the teacher acknowledged her students' voices, and how her knowledge about her students identities influence her choices of materials, activities, and interactions will be presented. The case study could inform the practices of the implementation on acknowledging the students' cultures.

Key words: Students' voice, Students' identity, acknowledging student voice

Introduction

One of the many knowledge and skills that teachers need to have to make teaching more effective is the knowledge of the learners. The knowledge of the learners refers to in-depth understandings of the students (Park, 2011). Teachers need to discover many aspects of the students, such as their prior schooling experience, their home culture, and their identity, and the teachers also need to know how these aspects may affect the teaching and learning process. Therefore, it is suggested that students' views and opinions about the teaching and learning process need to be taken into account in many level of educational decisions such as in selecting school's policies and practices, developing curriculum, and selecting classroom's materials and activities (Nieto, 2010). Nieto (2010) also suggests that one way to begin the process of changing school policies and practices is to listen to the students' view about them. Besides, Ferguson, Hanreddy, and Draxton (2011) also

argue that considering the 'student voice' in schooling in making decision about their learning environment may increase their engagement and motivation for learning which eventually may lead to a successful learning.

Another important aspect of the students that teachers need to understand is the student identities. Knowing the students' identity is important because the lack of this knowledge may cause educational failures. Nieto (2010) argues that many students were reported being bored in school and seeing little relevance in what was taught for their lives and this has caused the students to be more disengagement. One of the reasons why this happens is, according to Nieto (2010), because many schools neglect to take into account the students background and experiences. Students come to class and bring their own cultures which influence them in how they learn, and a failure to notice the different learning styles will cause mismatch between students' culture and classroom culture. This mismatch will cause the students to fail in the education, simply because the students do not learn the same way as the schools teach them.

Nieto (2010) suggested that schools need to be more responsive towards the cultural capitals that the students bring into schools and tried to utilize these capitals to maximize teaching and learning process. Therefore, identifying students' cultural backgrounds are crucial to enable the school to assist students' learning. It is important for teacher to make decision on what kind of materials, classroom activities, and interactions should be used in teaching in order to, what Kumaravadivelu (2003) refers to as, "minimize perceptual mismatch" between teachers' teaching style and students' learning style. Teachers, as one of the policy makers in school, are also suggested to include students' voices and consider the student identity in designing and conducting classes.

However, the students' voices are rarely heard when the discussion concerning strategies for confronting educational problems is emerged Nieto (2010). She also argues that this is really problematic because students are also one of important parties, if not the most important, in school context, and educational transformation cannot take place without the inclusion of the voices of the students. Similarly, as quoted by Biddulph (2011), (Brooker and McDonald (1999) also argue that "while the curriculum supposedly exists to serve the interests of learners, their preferences, if sought at all, are marginalized and their voices are mostly silent in curriculum making" (p. 382). The challenges for considering students voices in the teaching and learning process may come from a doubt whether those voices will give positive effects because students are sometimes sought as individuals that are not yet capable in making a good decision, especially for their own learning. Besides, a practical implication on how teachers should acknowledge the students' identities in teaching and learning process needs to be proposed. Therefore, this paper will mainly discuss about how a teacher recognizes the students' voice and identity as reflected in the teacher's decision on teaching materials and activities. Two main themes will be presented; first part of the paper will

describe on how the teacher give voice to the students in the teaching and learning process. The second part will discuss about how teacher's constructs of students identity influence the design of her class activities.

Research Methodology

The data in this research were mainly gathered through observations and interviews. The researcher observed an experienced teacher who taught a Research Writing class in a mid-sized state university in the northeastern United States. The observations was carried out in one semester and was done in two phases. The first phase of observation was a general observation to determine the research focus and research questions, and the second was carried out in a more focused way based on the research questions that had determined after the phase of the observations. Interviews were also carried out to obtain more detailed and elaborate data. The interviews were carried out five times with both face-to-face interviews and e-mail interviews.

Class Context

The research was carried out in a Research Writing class which aimed at improving the students' critical thinking, reading, research, and writing skills, where students had to make a research portfolio at the end of the semester. The students in this class were mostly student athletes who joined the varsity teams. There were 28 students enrolled in this class, 13 male and 15 female students. Among those students were 13 varsity athletes, 7 nursing students, 3 exchange students from Taiwan, 1 exchange student from China, 1 student from Elementary Education major, and 3 students from Fashion Merchandising Major.

One of the important components in this class was mentor system; it is a system that was set up by the teacher where students were appointed to be mentors/leaders for other students. Mentors were invited to be mentors based on the teacher's experience when she taught them in previous semester and also based on recommendation from other teachers who taught the same class. Mentors had to be responsible, always be prompt, and be ready to help their mentees when needed. Mentors also acted as mediators between the students and the teacher, for example if the students were, for some reasons, afraid or shy to ask questions they could go to their mentors and the mentors will encourage them to approach the teacher to ask questions. The teacher mentioned that the mentors have changed the teaching dynamic in the class and the teacher's relationship with the students.

Another important component of this course is the use of film series *Rome* as the main 'text' that students have to 'read' as a basis for their research portfolio project. The class met three times a week and one meeting was called a Community Film Night where the students watched the films together, they could even bring their friends who were not enrolled in the class. After watching the

film, students did a short pre-and-post clicker survey with the "I-Click StudentResponse XR Device" or "clickers". The teacher wrote in the syllabus handout that the reasons behind the use of film in this class is that the students grew up in a world of moving images and most of them are experts in analyzing moving images. She argued that it is important for her to utilize their expertise with this kind of research and the use of film in this context is a way of discussing the ideas and concepts inherent in all types of research resources.

Findings and Discussion

This section of the paper will present the findings drawn from the analysis of the data obtained from both the observation and the interviews. The presentation of the findings will be presented in two sections. The first section will report on how the teacher acknowledge the students' voices in the teaching and the learning process, and the second part will discuss how the teacher acknowledge the students identity as reflected in her teaching methodologies and materials.

Students' voices in the teaching and learning process

Incorporating students' voices is one of the important features that I observed from the teacher. She always listens to the students' opinions even before she decides on the materials and activities she used in the class. First, she took into consideration on students' opinion about what kind of text (this class used movie series as the main text that students have to watch) she should use in her class, as she described:

I've used a lot of different approaches to incorporating film into Research Writing classes.... from documentaries on a theme, to biographies, to centering on films the students pick out on a central theme....all sorts of ways. But the idea of having a series and having them bring their friends to a once-a-week community, open-for-everyone Film Night with Food was suggested by some Mentors. (Stilwell, Post Observation Interview , 2011)

It showed that the Mentors' (the leaders of students' group) opinions, as the representatives of students' voice, have led the teacher into deciding to use *Rome* movie series in the class and also use Community Film Night as one of the important class activities. It proved to be valuable information for the teacher since she reported that the students were more interested with the class materials and more engage in the class activities. This is confirm by the poling that the teacher carried out at the end of the semester that showed that 95% of the students are now more interested in things related to Ancient Rome because of the movie series they watched in the class.

The teacher's decision in considering the students' opinion in choosing the materials and classroom activities clearly contributed to the students' interest and involvement in the teaching and learning processes. I think that by taking into account the students' voices, the teacher has shared her

responsibilities as the designer of materials and classroom activities. She was no longer the only person who decided what and how to learn, but she involved the students in that decision. This conforms with the notion of promoting the learners' autonomy, as Sakai, Takagi, & Chu (2010) argues that autonomous students should take responsibility for their own learning, and taking responsibility means to be involved partially or totally in educational processes that traditionally only carried out by the teachers, such as "deciding on learning objectives, selecting learning methods and evaluating processes" (p.12). Therefore, considering students' voice may promote students' learning autonomy.

Second incidence where the teacher valued the students' voice was when the students evaluate the class activities. Some of the students expressed their concerns to the teacher about the class activities where other students cheated in the classroom and the teacher was not aware of it. Responding to the students' concern, the teacher, then, held a meeting after the class to find a solution to this problem. The meeting clearly showed the teacher's responsiveness towards students' voice because in this meeting she listened to students' suggestions on what needed to be done to solve the issue. I believe that the teacher could solve this problem herself, but by involving the students, she clearly demonstrated that she valued students' opinion and this may assist the students "to become agents of their own learning... This provoked more students' engagement to the class activities as Nieto (2010) argues that when students are treated as if they do know something and contribute something for the class, they can become more energized and more motivated.

The teacher's effort to give students voices could also be reflected on her decision in creating mentor system. She realized that there are students who might not have to opportunity to use their voice in the class for several reasons such time limitation, or even students' personalities such as being shy to speak publicly or afraid of other students' reaction towards their opinion. The mentor system as a group where students were put in groups and one student was nominated to be their representatives; in the group the students may express their opinions, concerns, or worries, and then their representative would report it to the teacher. The teacher described that the mentor system had changed the teaching dynamic of the class because it helped the students to be less fearful in approaching the teacher or asking questions to her. The students who did not feel at ease in voicing their thoughts could discuss that in the mentor group and the representatives would go to and discuss them with the teacher. By doing this, teacher created a system where every student's voice would be heard, even for those who never speak in the classroom. This means that the teacher provided equal opportunity for the students to be involved in and to contribute to classroom activities.

All the incidents presented above highlight how valuable the students' voices are for this teacher. Through giving the students' voice in the teaching and learning processes; the teacher was able to choose the materials and activities that were more interesting and more engaging to the

students. Besides, by giving students' chances to voice their thoughts, the teacher also tried to promote their autonomy that may enable them to continue learning even after their formal education has ended (Sakai, Takagi, & Chu, 2010).

Students' identities as reflected in class materials and activities

Another important point that I observed from the teacher is how she identified her students' identity and how it influence her in designing her class.

Tsang (2004) argues that teachers' decisions in every dimension of teaching (pre, while, and post teaching) are the result of what teachers believe about what is important or ideal in her teaching. I noticed that the teacher always took into consideration on students' identity in every decision she made in her teaching to ensure students' engagement in the teaching and learning process. In the next part of this paper, I will describe how my mentor's teacher perceptions about students' identity as reflected in her choices of materials, activities, and interactions.

a. Students' identity as the "Children of The Moving Image"

As described earlier, the class that I observed used movie series *Rome* as the main text in the class; and the teacher's decision in using them as a text was based on many years experience in teaching the class (Research Writing) and reflected on her teaching. In my interview with the teacher, she described that she has been teaching the same subject for 12 years and have tried many ways to get students interested in the class. In the first year of her teaching, 50% of her students failed in her class and she realized that students were bored with her traditional approach of teaching. Then, she tried to find ways to get the students interested and more engaged with the class. Then, she said that she found this discontinuity on what students are interested to learn with what they have to learn in the class.

The teacher described the students' identity as a "Children of Moving Images" as she described in her learning contracts:

That's why I consider everyone born after 1980 to be Children of the Moving Image, which is a good name for your [students'] generation. You grew up in a world of moving images that people of my generation can only vaguely grasp. You have grown up with moving images in every form, shape, and fashion coming at you faster than any other generation, ever. (Stilwell, Crimson Hawks FYEnglish 202: Research Writing Learning Contract, 2011, p. 7)

The teacher assumed that the students were brought up in a time where moving images became an important part of their life; the moving images have taken part in the formulation of students' culture and identity. This has made the students more responsive and interested to any moving images. The teacher was clearly aware of this identity and decided to accommodate the students' interests in her teaching by using movies in the class, to ensure the students engagement in the class. I believe that if

the teacher forced the students to learn only from academic text books, the students will not be engaged to the class or subject because there has been a discontinuity of how students prefer to learn with how teacher or school wants them to learn (Nieto, 2010). This will result in failure in learning and teaching.

Besides, by using movie series as texts the teacher claimed that she acknowledged the students expertise in analyzing this type of text and maximize that in the teaching and learning process. She used the movie series as a springboard for students to think about the research topic they have to write about. The use of the movies may also provoke students' critical thinking as Mok (2010) suggests that "teachers should be making greater use of imaginative or literary texts to develop learners' critical thinking, creativity, and cultural awareness" (p. 264). The movie series were definitely enable the students to be critical thinkers, creative and aware of cultural differences as it was shown in some of the research topics that students came up with at the end of the semester. Those topics were Ancient Roman parasitic diseases, Roman road building methods, Roman slavery, Roman taxes and its relationship to our tax system, Roman food culture, Roman surgical methods, Roman death rites, Roman attitudes and practices of prostitution, and Roman women's hairstyles.

b. Students' identity as young adults

The students in this class were 18 – 24 years old who often are categorized as young adults. Harmer (2007) identifies that "young adults are bound up, after all, with a pronounced search for identity and a need for self esteem: young adults need to feel good about themselves and valued (p. 83). In the interactions with the students, the teacher demonstrated her knowledge about young adult characters as reflected below:

You [students] experts at analyzing the moving image already, so I intend to tap into that expertise as a way into discussing the concepts I feel that it is important for you to consider learning in this class. I consider it irresponsible to not utilize your expertise with this kind of research discourse to discuss any text of any kind. Because of all those statements, in this class we think of film as the port key (*Harry Potter* fans, you know what I mean!) and will thus be utilizing film as a way of discussing the ideas and concepts inherent in all types of research resources (Stilwell, *Crimson Hawks FYEnglish 202: Research Writing Learning Contract*, 2011, p. 7).

The teacher demonstrated that she valued students' expertise, and as pointed out earlier as young adults they like to be valued. The teacher also showed how she valued the students by always giving praise when they performed well in the class and encourage them when they did not perform well in the class. I consider this as her effort to encourage students to learn since as young adults usually more motivated when they feel that they are valued.

Moreover, teacher's constant praises and encouragements throughout the teaching and learning process also demonstrated her acknowledgement of students' need for "peer and teacher's approval" (Harmer, 2007, p. 83), a characteristic of young adults. In response to the students' need for peer approval, she developed the mentor system where students were put in groups. In this group the students could strengthen their bond with their peers by sharing and discussing their opinion or problems about the class. In addition, the teacher's decision of incorporating many learning sources, such as movies, clicker devices, and library research corresponded to Harmer's (2007) suggestion in teaching young adults that teachers have "to build bridges between what they want and have to teach and their students' worlds of thoughts and experiences" (p. 84). Using materials which are relevant to and involving for the students may also provoke students' engagements.

c. Students' identity as students-athletes

50% of the students in this class were athletes of the university teams; as students-athletes the students were stereotyped as "less engaged and competent academically than other students [and this] may hinder their performance on academic tasks" (Yopyk & Pentice, 2005, p. 329). In my interview with the teacher, she stated that she was aware with this stereotyping and realized that some students-athletes would be affected by this negative stereotyping and discouraged in joining the teaching and learning process. Then, she determined to fight against this negative stereotyping by making a series of efforts to give opportunity to students to succeed in her class. She demonstrated that by giving the students many supports such as detailed study guides for quizzes and tests and the mentor system that enables them to seek for help to other students. The teacher's efforts to provide equal opportunity to the students to succeed were also useful for other students, even if they were not athletes. Besides, the teacher also tried to involve other parties that may encourage the students-athletes to learn in the class such as their coaches. The teacher stated that she also talked to the students' coaches to help her to motivate the students to attend the class since for these students; their coaches were important figures that they respected and listened to.

In addition, as athletes, in my opinion, students valued competitions and team works; they were more interested in activities which required them to compete with other students, especially when they had to compete in groups. The teacher facilitated the students' interest by incorporating clicker device as one of the classroom activities. In the clicker quizzes or tests, students would be put in groups and compete with each other; and from my observation, the students were engaged with the activities. Besides, this clicker device also enabled the teacher to engage students because it provided opportunity for collaborative learning. This conformed the research findings about using clicker device carried out by Kolikant, Drane, & Calkins (2010) that revealed that using clicker increased the students' engagement in the classroom interaction and it may transform the classroom from a place of silence to one rich in interaction which eventually will increase students' learning.

All the incidents described above showed that being responsive to the students' identities may engage them to the class activities which may lead into a more successful teaching and learning process. Besides, the teacher's decisions before, during and after the class reflected of what Kumaravadivelu (2006) referred as parameters of particularity, practicality and possibility. She demonstrated that she knew who her students' are and could chose what might work for those particular students to ensure students' engagement which, I consider, is important in good teaching.

Conclusion

Acknowledging the student voice and identity is a must since it can result in a more effective teaching such as more participation from the students, which may eventually lead to more successful learning. There are many methods that can be used to acknowledge the student voices and identity in teaching and learning process such as involving students in making decisions for their learning such as using in deciding the materials and activities used in the class. The teacher in this research also used a mentor system to ensure that all student voices were heard, at least from their representatives. The teacher also used the student voices to find solutions for class problems. Besides, the teacher also acknowledged the students identities in the selection of materials and activities for the class. The teacher used film as the main text as a recognition of the student identity as a generation of the moving image. The teacher used constant praises and encouragements in the classroom as a recognition toward the students identity as young adults who constantly need affirmations. Finally, the teacher also choose a competitive activity as one of the activities in the class to acknowledge their identity as student athletes. In conclusion, student voices and identities as part of the students' cultures are important aspects to be consider in teaching and learning process to ensure successful learning outcomes.

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