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## **Self-Reflection of Cultural Relevance in the Classroom**

### **Part 1**

In the past few months, I have been going through one of the biggest transition periods of my life which has allowed me to do a lot of soul-searching and reflecting personally and professionally. In addition to decision to continue my educational path through the Endeavor Program, my wife and I have decided to pull out our roots from Wisconsin after living here our entire lives and relocate to Washington State; nearly 2,000 miles from all family and friends. Many have said: "Are you insane? You both have great jobs, a nice house, incredible friends and family, and Wisconsin is the only place I would ever want to live!" My response to them is, "Yes that is all true, but Wisconsin is no longer who I am or where I belong, and family and friends will always be there regardless of distance." Oddly enough, many of my close friends and acquaintances have repeatedly stated the claim that after spending my entire life in the same place, leaving at this point in my life is like you are abandoning who you are. In contrary, my best friends and family have supported my decision by stating that they are so proud of not letting anything stand in our way of following our dreams and most of all, embracing who we truly are. I have a relentless love for the wilderness, mountains, oceans, and exploring.

In the past few weeks, I have been in the interviewing process for teaching. One component of the interviews that surprised me was how many questions involved personal cultural perspective and pedagogy. One question I was asked that I felt was of rich substance and required a deeper level of personal reflection and thought prior to responding was: describe your life experiences and values that have helped shape who you are as an educator. My answer directly correlates the question of what are the aspects of your identity/culture? My response in a nutshell was that I was raised in a farming community with traditional values that instilled in me the qualities of morals, responsibility, respect for all creatures and Mother Earth, and most of all the meaning of hard work and dedication. I have always been a dreamer, an adventurer, and was brought up to not judge, to embrace people of all colors and cultures, and I believe my most endearing trait is my passion for learning, especially learning from others.

Through my experiences and memories, my recent thoughts and reflections, and many wishes of luck I have recently received from peers, clients, students, and friends, it makes me proud to say that I believe I am very

well-rounded, open-minded, accepting of others, and always willing to listen with an open-mind to all opinions. Even though I am in my mid-thirties, in my mind I am still young, especially in spirit. According to my students, I am old as dirt. But looking back when I was there age, I can certainly say it was a much different time. I grew up in a community called Eagle, WI. My family was not farmers, in fact far from it. My father was a banker and my mother a real estate agent. They moved to the outskirts of suburbia to allow their children to grow up surrounded by nature and nearly 100,000 acres of public state forest called the Kettle Moraine. Eagle is still the only town I know of where more people ride to town on their horses than vehicles, and there is more parking for buggies than cars.

I am going to share a story that everyone I tell this to is always blown away by. Even though it was 30 years ago, relatively speaking, it was not that long ago. My friends and I lived about a mile from school. On nice days, we either rode our bikes or often-times hiked home through the woods. When I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, a few of my friends and I took hunter safety together in the summer and come fall time, we wanted to go hunt either pheasant, ducks, geese, or go archery hunting for deer after school. Our principal, Mrs. Jansen, allowed us to bring our guns or bows and arrows (unloaded and in cases of course) and store them in a closet within the office when we arrived, then after school, we would get changed into our camouflage and boots, and she would hand us our weapons and would always tell us to be safe, shoot straight, and most of all respect and give thanks to all creatures! At this time, the only other female outdoorswoman I knew and highly respected was my Aunt Sally. Mrs. Jansen our principal was also a great outdoorswoman and would love to hear our stories the next day! These wonderful women were great influences in my life, were on the cutting edge of woman's roles in the hunting and outdoor recreation world and were often more successful than their husbands fishing and in the field. Even though Mrs. Jansen supported us hunting, she always was instilling into us ethics, respect for life, and the need for preservation and conservation efforts to protect our natural resources. The reason I mention this story is because of the issue of gun violence in schools. It is a different world today and it deeply saddens me to think of the families these occurrences have impacted. Reflecting on my experiences of growing up and never-ever worrying about this dilemma in schools, all I can do for my students is to try to influence them to greater appreciate the value and fragility of life, and how decisions people make can change the lives exponentially for countless others.

As I grew up, I was not like other typical teenagers and college students. Most of my friends were living off Mom & Dad and I was on my own since the day I turned 18. Even during college, most of my friends did not work. I

spent my teenage years working on a horse farm called Swinging W Ranch where I helped care for 150 horses every day. I worked for an old-time farmer named Bob Winzenreid. He was diagnosed with polio as a child, told he was never going to walk, went on to fight in and survive the Vietnam War, and at the age of 65, could still out work and throw a bale of hay further than any of his farm boys. He instilled in me the meaning of hard work. He always told me, "the day you stop learning and working, is the day you begin giving up on life." When I went on to college, at the age of 18 I leased and managed my own 160-acre horse farm where I boarded and cared for 50-60 horses every day, including between 15-25 of my own horses that I raised, rescued, trained, and sold for additional income. I also started my own horseshoeing business and carriage wedding service when I was only twenty years old. Seventeen-years later, I am a master farrier and blacksmith in addition to a teacher.

Our family is very outdoorsy; camping, hiking, fishing, and hunting were family traditions. Our vacations consisted of all six of us cramming in a car, seeing every State and National Park, and my dad being a history buff, every historical site we could fit into a week or two (these family trips sparked my passion for travel and adventure). I still remember when we visited Gettysburg, my Dad correcting the tour guide on their accuracy of events and began curating facts of the battle the tour guide didn't even know. After graduating college, I wanted to travel the world and experience every culture I could. This unfortunately required time and money. I decided to grow my horseshoeing business. By doing this I apprenticed under one of the most fascinating and worldly educated people I have ever met, especially considering he dropped out of school in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. His name was Larry Peterson; cowboy, world philanthropist, pilot, thrill seeker, and educator. Larry had done it all and then some. I began working for Larry, and I arranged it so I worked a month on and a month off, giving me the time and money to travel the country and the world. Some of my greatest experiences included backpacking across Europe, spending three months touring Mexico and helping to build houses, and multiple trips to South America and Asia. With all the places I have seen, it only opened my eyes and mind to the appreciation of cultures and how many more places I want to visit. Over time, I have grown great respect for the world, its ways, and unfortunately, often the negative outlook foreigners have on America and our values.

Being the youngest of four siblings by nearly ten years and always having an old soul, I have always been surrounded by people older and wiser than me. I have learned a lot on my time here on this ground and find the analogy holds true that if I only knew then what I know now. One of my biggest

regrets is not learning another language. I have tried, but it is something I continuously have struggled with. As an educator, I hear my students complain about learning Spanish. I never had that opportunity when I was younger, and I always try to encourage my students to continue to practice speaking a second language. It is unbelievable to me how we are nearly the only country in the world that strictly relies on one language. In that respect, I often feel inferior when I meet someone who is bilingual or multilingual. I have so much respect for that ability.

## **Part 2**

Even though science and engineering are the two disciplines that I am most passionate about, I have always thrived in my mathematical abilities, and have strived to learn more about technology.

The discipline that I have the earliest memories of is engineering. Primarily because another very influential person in my life, my Uncle Tony is a retired aeronautical engineer for NASA. I still remember the emotions I had the first time I went to visit him and my aunt in California when I was about seven years old. I remember the excitement of going to NASA and seeing where he worked. It was amazing! I remember him showing me the ceramic plates that are only the bottom of the shuttle that he was testing and how he told me these little plates are what keeps astronauts safe in the shuttle because they insulate the shuttle from the heat of the engines and the freezing cold temperature of space. He explained why they needed to be small plates instead of one large one because the shuttle was designed to flex and if one plate was damaged it wasn't nearly as catastrophic as a larger piece. The entire experience was unbelievably cool and fascinating to me. I came home with all sorts of NASA gear and memorabilia. I remember thinking how incredibly awesome all my classmates would think it was when I brought in everything to share and tell!

My uncle was also an incredible woodworker and loved to build things. When I was about twelve, they retired and moved to Washington State. I began spending a few weeks with them every summer and one of the main reasons I fell in love with Washington and decided to move there myself. My uncle had the most incredible workshop! He had every tool and machine imaginable. He always said, "why buy it when you can make it better yourself, or why pay someone to fix something when you can do it yourself for free?" I learned a lot from my uncle, how to weld, how to select prime pieces of lumber, and how to split wood (lots of it) to earn dinner. I never complained. My Aunt Janice was a home ec teacher and was one of the main

reasons I decided to go into education. She was a gourmet chef and infused my love of cooking (one of my favorite sciences)!

From K-12, I was always taking apart and rebuilding things, learning how to fix things around the farm, especially old farm tractors and equipment. When I was in school, of course STEM was not called STEM, it was tech ed and completely separated from the sciences or core curriculum. These were elective classes, and unlike STEM classes today, there was very rarely any girls in any of these classes. In fact, I remember our teacher telling a girl that was in our class that this is dangerous place for girls because their long hair can easily get entangled in machinery and if he ever saw her hair not tied up short he would use a tin snip and chop it off! To this day, I don't know if he was serious or not. The girl was a friend of mine and loved the class or her hair enough to make sure her hair was securely tied up and tucked away! One of the reasons I love STEM so much is because how fun project-based learning was for me in middle and high school. I was not the best student when it came to strictly content. Being a dreamer and a kinesthetic learner, I am sure if I was an adolescent today, I would be labeled as an ADHD student. I believe these positive learning experience with STEM, pre-STEM, is the reason I am so passionate about the pedagogy and effectiveness of STEM strategies of instruction and ideology.

My first real job out of college was working for an electrical and mechanical engineering company called Systems Engineering that used robots to automate factories. I remember I received a lot of grief from people when I told them what I did because they said I was taking skilled positions away from blue collar workers. The community that I have been teaching in has several global industries that rely on factory automated machinery. To the opposite of the accused accusations of when I was designing these pieces of equipment, it made the companies more efficient, safer, and offered many more jobs that pre-automated factory machinery because it allowed the companies to be more profitable and expand operations that still need entry level workers to operate. This work experience helped shape my perception of the importance of STEM and realize that with the skill sets taught through STEM, it allows students a multitude of career options regardless of culture, previous life experiences, or academic success to find great jobs either directly out of high school, trade school, or with a college degree. The need and awareness of STEM is continuously growing, and I feel only going to be more important in the future for all students!

### **Part 3**

I am always reflecting my experiences in school and using them to make sense of how I structure a lesson, how I approach struggling students, or go above and beyond to give my all to teaching to provide life skills to all students.

I have had a few experiences in my travels that have helped me form to be a better teacher. I remember being in Mexico City and walking past a school that was in session. It was well over a hundred degrees outside; the school's windows and doors were wide open with no fans or air conditioning. It was along a busy street filled with stray dogs, loud noise, unbelievable amount of pollution, and in the middle of the most dangerous cities in the world. Houses were what I would consider to be shacks at best; pieced together scraps of metal and wood with an entire family crammed into a room. I could see the students as I walked by. Their clothes were dirty, the school room was nothing more than four dark walls, a conglomeration of falling apart chairs and tables, and the students were all so unbelievably intently focused on their school work. I couldn't help but think, education is the only means or chance of ever escaping this place. Ten years later, I wonder how many if any have? Another memory that stands out in my mind is when I was visiting Hong Kong and Japan. The dedication, strict studies, and personal efficacy of the students there was amazing to me. I was on a busy city bus in Hong Kong. At one of the stops, I looked out the window to see a group of about ten or more students, no older than second or third grade standing alone on the curb, all reading books! They all wore uniforms and everything from their hair to dress was impeccable. They all marched onto the packed bus, found any spot they could, held on to the railing with one hand and began to read. Not a single word spoken to each other the entire ride until they departed a few stops later. Last observation I made was when I was visiting Japan and the pride that the culture takes in everything they do. I was walking down a street behind two teenage student that were wearing backpacks and was evident they were on their way home from school. No cell phones, no messing around, just laughing and casual conversation. As we were passing by a public garden with some rock decorations, I see the teenagers stop abruptly and make a sharp right in front of us. They both stopped, crouched down, and began to pick up rocks that had been kicked out of place and onto the sidewalk. They both proceeded to neatly place the rocks back to where they belonged and then continued along their way. I only wished I knew how to speak Japanese, I would have told them how incredibly impressed I was by their actions of pride in their surroundings and community.

I have used these examples in my classes. I have asked my students why these actions of students from around the world were so important that I

would bring them up in class today? I have had students say responses such as American students are misbehaved or don't care about school as much as students in other countries or responses such as most kids would have just kicked the rocks, or I would have thrown them at my friend. My message to them is, these experiences have reflected the way I teach because I have learned from them that you may never know how one moment or action in your life, positive or negative, can affect someone else in a way that they will never forget. Even though, I have no clue who those students were from around the world, they would never remember that specific moment, but it is one that has impacted me as an educator and are experiences I will never forget. Wherever they are, I thank them for those memories.