

Small Moves, Big Impact: Making Space for Student Stories

During the third and fourth years of the five-year Knowles Teaching Fellowship, our overall goal is for Fellows to understand and improve learning opportunities for all of their students.

To truly understand learning opportunities, teachers must first understand and recognize that local, national and global societal factors have an impact on the education system and consider these factors in their improvement efforts. It can be daunting for teachers to think of these large local, national, and global issues. However, teachers cannot avoid seeing these issues represented in the lived experiences of their students. Students' lives and their stories inform us of these issues and by making room for those stories, we are able to simultaneously humanize our students and ourselves. It is in this shared humanity that we are able to increase students' opportunities to learn.

I know from my own experience that, as a student, I was visible for all the wrong reasons. I stood out because I was different, awkward, gay. Not because I was smart, witty, and loveable. While my otherness was highly visible, my loveliness was invisible. Every day I did my best to conceal my whole self for fear of any part of me, namely my "difference," would become the target of yet another attack. Being a new student my junior year was terrifying and pushed me to retreat even further into my personal safety zone. I grew quieter, meeker—a shadow of the person I wanted to be. I had one teacher who noticed me. Noticed my quietness, my loneliness, and, as I came to understand, my loveliness. Mrs. Bober invited me to study in her chemistry classroom before and after school. She sat with me at a lab table as I worked on homework and asked me about my life. Asked me about the school I came from. Asked me about who I wanted to be. She invited me to share my stories and she shared hers. I learned she too was new to the school, she loved peanut brittle, and was recently married. These small but meaningful parts of her that she shared reminded me she was an actual person. I saw her. And she saw me. I started speaking up in class. Soon people discovered I was funny, I was smart, I had a voice. I went from a floundering student to a flourishing one. Mrs. Bober recommended I move up a track the next year. I

continued to excel and went on to major in math and physics in college and became a high school math and science teacher.

As teachers, we invite students to share their stories in the classroom in order to discover who our students are: to be able to truly see our students; to begin to understand how they see the world; and how the world sees them. Through this lens we come to better understand the societal factors that have an impact on our educational system. I so wished more of my teachers understood that society was telling me I could not be me. That I had to hide my otherness. That I had to conform to a very rigid performance of masculinity and how much I had to consciously focus on this performance (rather than academics) throughout the school day. Though Mrs. Bober and I never explicitly discussed this, she came to understand me and, I believe, the weight I was under. Her understanding helped lift a bit of this weight and allowed me to become a truer version of myself which in turn allowed me to excel academically.

I believe that by inviting my “otherness” into the classroom, opportunities to learn were increased for all students. Difference is something that invites creativity, sparks the imagination, and provides new and different perspectives. Inviting me into the space didn’t just help me, it helped everyone. As Mrs. Bober invited me into the space it signaled to others, especially those outside the “norm,” that they were welcome, too. I remember the student that sat in front of me in Mrs. Bober’s class. She too was an outsider. She wore black every day, stayed mostly to herself, and often had her head down. Though we were quite different from one another, we shared this outsider status. As I came out of my shell, she too started speaking up more. We had this shared experience of feeling on the periphery and as soon as one of us started making our way inward, it helped the other. We started talking to each other more. She became my lab partner. She started participating in class and, as it turns out, was an exceptional student. One day Mrs. Bober needed a student to lead a demo for the class and I remember this student confidently getting up and leading the class through the demonstration. She was shining and we were all learning from her—not only about the chemistry she was showcasing, but about our shared humanity.

Mrs. Bober’s move was a simple one. She invited me to sit with her after school. She invited me to share my story. Then, she encouraged me to share it with others. As teachers we need to provide students with the opportunity to bring who they are into the classroom. We also need to examine the ways we

encourage, or discourage, the inclusion of all students. Throughout my education I was taught, both explicitly and implicitly, about the “naturalness” of heterosexuality. What other “naturalness” shows up in our classrooms? What are we doing to disrupt it? What stories do we invite in (or personally share) that humanize all of us?

In the third and fourth years of the Fellowship, we too focus on small moves to help the Fellows share their stories with each other. We begin, as Mrs. Bober did, by inviting Fellows in. We on staff share our stories of teaching and of life as Fellows share theirs. We reflect on how sharing our stories, our identities and our humanity shapes how we relate to each other. We give Fellows opportunities to pause and think about their own classrooms, their own students, their own moves. At the end of one such activity we ask the Fellows to write down one thing they’ve learned from the exercise and one thing they strive to do as a result of what they’ve learned. Their insights are powerful and the subsequent moves they strive to make may be small, but can have a huge impact. What follows are a few of the reflections that pointed to the power of welcoming student stories into the classroom.

“One thing I learned (realized) is why identity is important in my science classroom! Students’ race, class, gender, etc. make science a non-neutral place”

“Something I’ve learned is I am happiest when I am in contexts where my core identity is represented and welcomed. I strive to embrace identity and incorporate more space and time for my students and my own identities to shine.”

“Something I will strive to do is remember that my classroom is not neutral/insulated from issues of identity and invite those conversations whenever possible”

“Strive to do: ask students to share how they perceive themselves as a learner, how they want to be perceived, and what I can do to bridge the gap”

“I will strive to integrate more of my own authentic self into my relationships with my students and allow the same for my students”

“I aim to create more intentional spaces for my students to reflect on and share their personal identities and how those relate to being a learner in my class and content area”

“Allow time to really listen to students”

In the third and fourth years of the Fellowship we focus on creating equitable classrooms by focusing on these questions (among others) and thinking of the

small moves, similar to Mrs. Bober's, that we can make to include all students. We begin by investigating the norms we construct in our classrooms and we reflect on how these norms might include and/or exclude students. We learn to share our stories with each other and create ways to share our stories with our students while welcoming their stories into the classroom in authentic ways. We reflect on how we view the world and how the world views us influences the opportunities to learn in our classrooms and affects our working relationships with our colleagues.

I invite you to think about experiences you've had where you've been fully invited into a space. How was this accomplished? What did this mean for you and those around you? What can you learn from this and apply to your current context? How are you inviting others into your space? How are you sharing your story in a way that creates a safe space for others to share theirs?