

The SEED Project

SEED seminars invite teachers' conscious attention to social, emotional, and political education. We feel that unless teachers can do for themselves what was not done for them in the way of breaking silence and isolation around social, emotional, and political learning, they will continue in the patterns of denial they have grown accustomed to living within and (inadvertently) enforcing.

For the SEED Leaders' training process, we have developed many exercises that help us to reflect on the social, emotional, and political educations we received through inadvertent instruction on taboo subjects of power, especially with regard to gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, race, group dynamics, community relations, commonalities, differences, jobs, roles, authority, and intergroup relations. The aim of these exercises is to foster advertent growth and development in social, emotional, and political learning in all who are touched by the SEED Project, whether they are the new seminar leaders each year, the hundreds of teachers in their seminars, or the thousands of students whom those teachers teach.

We describe here just two out of some fifty interactivities, which is our term for activities in which everyone participates, with no one simply functioning as an observer.

Interactive Exercise #1

In the words of Emily Style (1981), we “make textbooks” of the lives in the room, by going around the circle, writing and reading aloud Girl/Boy pieces using the discipline of the circle. Before the week-long summer New Leaders workshop, we send the forty teachers who are preparing to lead seminars Jamaica Kincaid's (1978) short autobiographical piece called “Girl.” We ask participants to write their own version of voices in their heads from early childhood telling them how to be a boy or a girl. We tell them that at the opening meeting of the workshop they may read all, some, or none of their piece.

For the opening circle on the first afternoon of the residential week, no one wears a name tag. It is not clear to new leaders which of the sixty people in the room are staff members and which are new leaders like themselves. There is no formal welcome. Sitting in a circle, we read, or occasionally say, the words we have brought in response to the Kincaid assignment. McIntosh repeats the statement that participants may read all or none or part of what they have brought. They may choose to listen rather than read. The point, she says, is to hear each other around the circle. She reads part or all of her own “Girl” piece and turns to the person to her left. Reading around the circle usually takes two hours.

For many people, this activity draws up deeply buried, influential teachings from childhood. The listening circle enables all sixty participants to respond (mostly in silence, sometimes with empathic sounds or laughter) to what others call up, to hear commonalities and differences, to sort and sift and connect. This assignment, including what Style has come to call “the discipline of the circle,” is a political arrangement that invites and regards intense listening to others' stories and forecloses the possibility of issues-oriented discourse on gender in the abstract.

Hearing about the personal (and political) teachings given to others deepens one's awareness of one's own early teachings as well.

Many participants' voices and body language show the impact of the training they received with regard to gender and also (often) race, class, sexuality, fear, avoidance, self-censorship, self-doubt, self-denial, and silence. Themes surface and recede. Messages that have worn well take on stark contrast beside the many that have not. There is laughter at familiar prescriptions and at particularly pungent formulations. Sometimes, there are tears. Kincaid's piece is written in the imperative voice, so we encourage the speakers to use the imperative voice in their pieces. The effect is that they transmit decades-old messages coming directly through them, now offered to a circle of listeners in the present.

"Becoming" a boy or a girl for most people in the circle required a lot of training and repetition and warning. One was not automatically, easily, or naturally a boy or girl but needed to have one's gender socially constructed, artificially channeled, so as not to encroach on the territory of the other, sometimes called "opposite," sex. Those who escaped such conditioning within their families and cultures stand out by contrast with those who remember emphatic teaching about shaping themselves to fit a gender norm. Leaving the circle, most if not all have a heart and head full of others' cultural constraints, obligations, and coping strategies in relation to those they themselves received.

In this interactivity, we answer Style's invitation to make "textbooks of our lives" and balance our attention to both the "scholarship on the shelves and scholarship in the selves" (Style, 1981). Kincaid's piece is the (published) scholarship on the shelf to which we respond. The Girl/Boy activity is orchestrated to include every person in the circle as the authority on his or her own experience, invited to speak in personal terms and not to comment on others' words, except by muted responsive exclamations and facial expressions in the course of the serial testimony process.

This exercise, which McIntosh devised in 1985, teaches about "gender" differently than an abstract discussion on gender would, by tapping into everyone's own deep internal development in a gendered world. We find that abstract discussions of gender (or any other complex matter with systemic dimensions) invite familiar conflicts and impasses. They result in an often polarizing, unsatisfactory pattern, in which everyone talks at the same time from stubborn, unexamined positions. This pattern operates in classes with students as well as in faculty meetings, and does not advance awareness; abstract discussion usually keeps most faculty or students "stuck" in familiar locations, most being silent observers of others and all but a few wishing to be elsewhere.

Interactive Exercise #2

We use Style's 1988 essay "Curriculum as Window and Mirror" to respond to the art of Carmen Lomas Garza. Style devised this exercise. On any available surface, Style spreads out photographs of paintings by Carmen Lomas Garza that are found in the collection published by The New Press entitled *A Piece of My Heart/Pedacito de mi Corazon* (1991). She asks each participant to choose a picture and to pair up with any other person to discuss their chosen

pictures. She states her idea that at its best, curriculum can serve as both window and mirror. In Style's 1988 essay, she imagines the curriculum as an architectural structure that schools build around students. Ideally, for each student, this structure will provide both windows out to the experiences of others and mirrors of the student's own reality and validity. Style points out that the Garza pictures may seem to serve some people as windows only, as one did for her when she first saw it, a man with a flaming cone of paper stuck in his ear. However, upon reading that the title of the picture was *The Earache*, she came to remember the hot salt bag used for earaches in her family, that she had forgotten years ago. Suddenly, the picture became a mirror as well.

Style asks participants to study a Garza picture silently in order to identify some window and mirror elements relative to their own experiences. Then she asks each participant to tell his or her partner for three minutes about how the painting serves as both a window and a mirror. The second partner is invited to speak as though the first has not spoken. The task is not to respond but to start fresh. If a partner runs out of words in the allotted time, both discussants can remain silent.

In a debriefing, Style asks, "How was this activity for you?" The responses palpably refute the charge that multicultural curriculum is "divisive." All participants find some self-mirroring elements in the pictures they have chosen. In other words, they find some familiar ground in their identification with the scenes and people of the pictures. Most also find elements strange to them. Many find differences in depiction of activities that they do not know (but did not necessarily know that they did not know). Garza's illustrations carry a lot of cultural specificity about Texan Latino/a daily life, behavior, customs, dress, food, families, celebrations, and living arrangements. In each picture, it is clear that something is going on, though the nature of the event may be quite opaque to some observers.

By way of teaching about acculturated social behavior, Style asks for a show of hands from those who had trouble filling their three minutes. She invites all to ponder what these responses show them about themselves. The ripple of response in the room indicates that these questions in themselves open up significant windows and mirrors about speaking and listening behavior. It has been our experience that the three-minute time frame invites people to get into a second and even third layer of rumination about a picture and to be heard out, while they embark on wording thoughts about a picture about which they may have thought they had little to say.

The Garza illustrations are colorful, detailed scenes of rural or village life in Texas in the 1950s. Most feature at least four people engaging in activity that one could describe to a curious five-year-old child, allowing a strong sense of common ground in the midst of cultural specificities. Often Latino/a participants upon finding some culturally familiar and intimate details have a very strong positive reaction to this activity. Their pleasure in it points up how few mirrors have existed in curricula and staff development projects for this population of teachers and students and, likewise, how few curriculum materials serve as "windows" for non-Spanish-speaking teachers and students.