

Literature as a Mentor's Curriculum

Podsiadlik, E.

University of Illinois - Chicago

The interplay between literature and life is a valuable resource for personal and professional inquiry and reflection. Literature creates contexts within which mentors can explore the ways they are being and becoming the mentors they've aspired to be. This is not a curriculum composed of techniques and strategies about how to mentor. Nor is it a quantitative analysis or case study of behaviors, attitudes, or outcomes. It is an introspective curriculum. Rather than focusing on producing answers or accumulating knowledge, using literature as a mentor's curriculum prioritizes the questioning itself. The search for answers and insight, not the answers themselves, is where the potential for insights, epiphanies, and revelations lies. Engaging with excerpts from fiction, poetry, and philosophical essays is a means to reflect on the ways in which mentors' identities shape their work, and how their work shapes their identity. The purpose of using literature as a curriculum is to help mentors better understand their work in ways that prioritize human experience, perception, and self-understanding. Underlying questions explored include: In what ways can mentors engage with this kind of introspection that has the potential to transform their work, lives, and the lives of those with whom they interact? To what extent can using literature as a mentor's curriculum help mentors better understand the scope and depth of their practice? As a resource for mentors regardless of their years of experience, using literature as a curriculum provides innovative pathways intended: 1) to highlight the kinds of personal and interpersonal issues, concerns, and conflicts that comprise the scope and depth of a mentor's work; and 2) to generate meaningful discourse and reflection (individually and collectively).

Keywords: Humanities, arts, reflective practice

Introduction

The idea that literature conveys a deeper reality of the outer world of lived experiences (Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1965) and has the potential to evoke a "wide-awakeness" (Greene, 1978) in terms of contemplating social, emotional, and moral issues underscores the value of using literature as mentor's curriculum. Literature's capacity to portray the nuances and uncertainties of life (Bamberg, 2011; Dewey, 1934; Eco, 2002) makes it a critical resource in guiding mentors toward exploring issues, concerns, and conflicts that comprise the complexities of their work. Using literature as a mentor's curriculum embodies the whole of an individual's lived experience and provides spaces for further reflection and discourse. This is especially relevant for mentors who, as Parker Palmer (2007) points out, oftentimes "must stand where personal and public meet, dealing with the thundering flow of traffic at an intersection where weaving a web of connectedness feels more like crossing a freeway on foot" (p. 18). Using literature as a curriculum hearkens to its etymological roots from the Latin "the course of a chariot race" (OED).

Although curriculum is oftentimes understood as a set of required readings, course syllabi, or content guides, the chariot race metaphor implies

its capacity for lifelong learning, discovery, and growth. This more expansive understanding of curriculum is less concerned with finite bodies of knowledge or replicable sets of outcome data. Instead, using literature as a curriculum aligns with what curriculum scholar William H. Schubert (2006) calls a focus on exploring what's worthwhile:

What's worth knowing, experiencing, needing, doing, becoming, being, overcoming, sharing, pondering, and contributing... Our work must focus on keeping what's worthwhile questions alive not only among educators, but in the lives of students and the general public. What can be more important? How should we proceed? (pp. 102-103)

Using literature as a curricular resource for meaning making and reflection is intended to create innovative paths (curricula) along which mentors can wrestle with the kinds of what's worthwhile questions Schubert suggests.

Literature Review

Major works in the field of curriculum studies that focus on the synergies among an individual's personal and professional identities, and their public work include the scholarship of Bamberg

(2011), Bruner (2004), Grumet (1980), and Miller (1990). More recently, scholarship that explores ways in which a mentor's identity impacts their work includes books by Johnson (2024); Mansfield, Welton, & Lee (2022), and Walker (2018). Whereas some mentoring resources (e.g., Ferriss, 2017; Mwachiro, 2022) highlight quotations and anecdotes in which mentors reflect on their work, the use of primary source literature (e.g., novels, poetry, essays) to deepen reflection and introspection is scarce. Integrating authentic literature as a primary mode of inquiry and reflection into these spaces is explored in curricular work by Eisner (2002), Podsiadlik (2014), and Savin-Baden & Wimpenny (2014). Using literature as a mentor's curriculum is grounded in a liberal humanist approach that places individuals at the center of what constitutes relevant contexts of learning and reflection (Gulla, 2014; Ivie, 2003; van Manen, 1982; Willis & Schubert, 1991).

Methods

The methods used to explore literature as a mentor's curriculum are not intended to gather information in the traditional sense. Maggi Savin-Baden and Katherine Wimpenny (2014) describe arts-based research as "a methodology that transcends arts and social science in order to reflect diverse human experience" (p. 14). Elizabeth Vallance (1991) describes aesthetic methodology as "systematic inquiry into the tacit, hidden 'underside' of a curricular situation; it seeks to identify the experiential qualities that color the situation and govern our reaction to it" (p. 160). Aesthetic inquiry is a model that seeks illumination over explanation and evoking further questions rather producing replicable answers. As a mode of research and evaluation, aesthetic inquiry relies on what Eliot Eisner (1979) describes as educational criticism and connoisseurship - the capacity to use informed insights and perspectives to bring to light innovative questions and to provoke new understandings of experiences and phenomena that could not be provided through quantitative data alone. Excerpts from four primary literary sources (*Les Misérables*, 1862; *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903; *A Little Life*, 2015; *The Prince of Tides*, 1986) are examined through lenses of educational criticism and connoisseurship to test their capacity to inspire meaningful introspective insights and questions that can inspire mentors to see familiar things in new ways, and to move into spaces that challenge, enlighten, or deepen their work and identities as mentors.

Results

Call to Duty Versus Call to Conscience

Throughout Victor Hugo's (1862) novel *Les Misérables*, protagonist Jean Val Jean grapples with experiences that create tension between his public call to duty and his personal call to conscience. Although in Val Jean's life for a brief time, the character of the Bishop is a mentor whose impact

is timeless and transformative. He listens without judgement as Val Jean describes life choices that left him with regret and shame. Rather than acting as judge or moral arbiter, the Bishop welcomes Val Jean to join him in reflection and deliberation. Together they move beyond binary responses and situational ethics and imagine larger truths and grander aspirations of not just who they are, but who they aspire to be; and not only what they 'should do' but what they 'ought to do':

While there is an infinite outside of us, is there not an infinite within us.... We must reform and transform. Certain faculties of mind are directed towards the Unknown; Thought, meditation, prayer, these are the great, mysterious pointings of the needle. Let us respect them. Whither tend the irradiations of the soul? Into the shadow, that is, towards the light.... Close by the rights of Man, side by side with them, at least are the rights of the Soul. (p. 437)

The philosophical tone and metaphorical language of this excerpt are meant to evoke reflection and insight. While the excerpt is highlighted to inspire contemplation on the public and private work of mentors, it elicits more questions than answers. Below are some questions to consider:

- In terms of mentoring, how might we understand Hugo's call that "we must reform and transform"? Reform and transform what, whom, how, and when? Can you recall mentoring moments that have touched upon reform? Upon transformation?
- What might Hugo mean when he describes movement "into the shadow, that is, towards the light"? Can you recall and describe mentoring moments when you have experienced this kind of moral, psychological, or emotional movement or development happening with you and/or your mentee?
- Reflecting on Hugo's poetic imagery (i.e. the mysterious pointings of the needle, the irradiations of the soul, the infinite within and without), what personal and/or professional moments (internally or externally) come to mind? In what ways might these moments strengthen (or challenge) a mentor's craft?

Reality of a Double-Consciousness

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) elaborates on what he calls 'double-consciousness' - "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (p. 5) and experiencing a two-ness: "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals" (p. 5). These images validate nuances of identity and conflict that can be triggered during mentoring experiences. Du Bois laments what he describes as the "peculiar wrenching of the soul" experienced when an individual's authenticity is forced beneath an imposed outer Veil:

The worlds within and without the Veil... produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment. Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double idealism... he is daily tempted to be silent and wary, politic and sly.... His real thoughts, his real aspirations, must be guarded in whispers (pp. 165-166)

How much of a mentor's work is done within and without the kinds of veils and doubleness Du Bois describes? What portion of a mentor's values and convictions "must be guarded in whispers"? How much of a mentee's values are sometimes contained beneath versions of Du Bois' Veil? Similar to the Victor Hugo image previously cited ("close by the rights of Man, side by side with them, at least are the rights of the Soul" p. 437), Du Bois' insights speak to an individual's identity, values and philosophy of life as they exist beyond mundane labors and outside bureaucratically-imposed tasks:

There must come a loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it; that seeks a freedom for expansion and self-development; that will love and hate and labor in its own way, untrammled alike by old and new. Such souls aforesaid have inspired and guided worlds. (p. 90)

This is a reminder that much of a mentor's work involves engaging both the seen and unseen aspects of each other's humanity. Imagine the ways that Du Bois' (1903) narrative further aligns with a mentor's work:

The rich and bitter depth of their experience, the unknown treasures of their inner life, the strange rendings of nature they have seen, may give the world new points of view and make their loving, living, and doing precious to all human hearts. And to themselves in these the days that try their souls, the chance to soar in the dim blue air above the smoke... (p. 90)

What's Worth Sharing and What's Worth Concealing

Considering the visible and invisible aspects of a mentor's work draws attention to another set of relevant questions: what's worth sharing and what's worth concealing. In Hana Yanagihara's (2015) novel, *A Little Life*, protagonist Jude St. Francis attempts to conceal his past and reveal an image of himself completely removed from his history. He believes that his personal life and identity are worth concealing. Yanagihara tells the reader that eventually "there are so many topics that he never discussed with anyone" that "he is unclear how to explain himself to himself" (p. 339). When Jude's mentor tries to get to know him better, Jude "had been reminded that that process - getting to know someone - was always so much

more challenging than he remembered":

He wished, as he often did, that the entire sequence - the divulging of intimacies, the exploring of pasts - could be sped past, and that he could simply be teleported to the next stage, where the relationship was something soft and pliable and comfortable where both parties' limits were understood and respected... other people had left him alone: his friends, his classmates, his other professors... (p. 138)

How common is it that mentor-mentee relationships become "something soft and pliable and comfortable"? Mentoring that moves into "the divulging of intimacies, the exploring of pasts" can be difficult for both mentor and mentee. Consider cases where these kinds of challenges were successfully met. What were some of the factors or qualities that helped the process and discourse move from spaces of concealing to revealing? Consider when these kinds of challenges could not be addressed successfully. What were some of the alternate paths discovered along the way that allowed mentoring to continue despite reticence to share?

Considering what's worth revealing and what's worth concealing is an issue of vulnerability. The intersection of public and private vulnerability is portrayed in Pat Conroy's (1986) novel *The Prince of Tides*. Although a popular and respected high school teacher, advisor, and coach, protagonist Tom Wingo avoids triggering memories of trauma he experienced as a child. Over time, his outer professional and personal life becomes a shell beneath which his emotional wounds festered. He is left personally and professionally vulnerable. How could Tom be present for his students without "the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able" (Palmer, 2007, p. 12)? Palmer adds that "deeper down, this pain is more spiritual than sociological: it comes from being disconnected from our own truth... from the heart that is the source of all good work... how can we remember who we are, for our own sake and the sake of those we serve?" (p. 21).

William Ayers (1993) emphasizes that a mentor's work "requires a serious encounter with autobiography: Who are you? How did you come to take on your views and outlooks? What forces helped to shape you?" (p. 129). These questions are especially relevant for those working with young people (coaches, mentors, counselors, teachers, parents, etc.) because "whatever else they teach, they teach themselves" (Ayers, p. 129). Tom's efforts to "run away from the things that hurt him" (p. 403) further suppress his suffering and grief. Only later does he realize that by concealing such a large piece of himself he had "become tentative, suspicious, and dull":

I learned to hold my tongue and mark my trail behind me... I was robbed of a certain optimism, that reckless acceptance of the

world and all it could hand my way that had always been my strength and deliverance. (p. 539)

One afternoon, Tom reads a poem to his students whose imagery evokes the pain, grief, and shame he had been concealing from himself since childhood. His outer protective shell suddenly began to dissolve in the public space of his classroom. It is the moment his professional and private lives converged:

I had suffered a terrible loss and I was simply inconsolable. I coached three sports and I taught English five classes a day and my work held me together. Then I could no longer bear the weight of my sadness. I was teaching one day and reading "Fern Hill" by Dylan Thomas... I became so moved by the poem that it brought tears to my eyes.... I couldn't stop crying. My class was distraught. I was distraught, but I couldn't help myself.... It was abnormal to have carried the weight of that sadness around so long without crying.... That was when they fired you (p. 205).

Until now, Tom the Professional and Tom the Human Being lived separate lives. He was living in a season of diminishment and fatigue (a "winter of deadening seriousness" without "the interior resources to dream new dreams" p. 25). He decides that "I'm sick of hiding what I really am, what I feel inside. I'm going... where I don't have to be afraid to find out everything there is to know about myself" (p. 481). Tom moves into a season of hopefulness after begins counseling. He learns to "make something beautiful out of the ruins" of his past (p. 672). While healing, Tom tends to his professional self as well. He comes to understand that "I needed students to complete myself" and "for the first time in a year, I started to have dreams of teaching again" (p. 282). What kinds of triggers threaten to diminish a mentor's work? Imagine a mentor working from a place of diminishment versus a place of hopefulness. When have there been times when the personal and the professional lives of a mentor seem to intersect in affirmative (or debilitating) ways? In what ways can mentors continue to find "the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able" (Palmer, 2007, p. 12)?

Discussion

Examining a mentor's work and identity through the lens of various literary works elicited a plethora of wonderings, queries, and open-ended contemplation. When reflecting on literary characters, such as the Bishop in *Les Misérables*, issues of conflict between a mentor's call to duty versus a personal call to conscience emerged. Examining the protagonist of Hana Yanagihara's (2015) *A Little Life* led to the kinds of deliberations mentors can face concerning

tensions between what's worth revealing and what's worth concealing. Delving into the inner turmoil Tom Wingo experiences in *The Prince of Tides* evoked deeper considerations of the kinds of triggers or conditions that might threaten to diminish a mentor's sense of worth. These are examples that emerged which demonstrate ways that literature uniquely can highlight the kinds of personal and interpersonal issues and conflicts mentors face.

Reflecting on literary images through a mentor's lens triggered a variety of reflection points. For example, examining the imagery in Victor Hugo's poetic elocution (e.g., mysterious pointings of the needle, irradiations of the soul, the infinite within and without) inspired curiosity into what personal and/or professional moments (internally or externally) these images might inspire. Du Bois' poetic rendering of authenticity that is stifled beneath veils and values that are compromised by an imposed doubleness led to deeper questioning regarding what portion of a mentor's values and convictions "must be guarded in whispers"? And how much of a mentee's "real thoughts and real aspirations" are sometimes contained beneath similar metaphorical veils?

The narratives, insights, and questions that emerged while using literature to more deeply reflect on some of the conflicts and concerns inherent to being mentors bring with them unique spaces of introspection and potential epiphany. The depth and expanse of relevant thought-provoking questions and insights inspired by literature create opportunities for mentors to reflect on their own beliefs and feelings about their work and to begin to examine their practice on personal, ethical, and ideological levels. More work can be done in terms of using literature as professional development for mentors. An obstacle, though, is that not everyone is comfortable with or adept at the degree to which artistic perspective and analysis is needed to facilitate the process. Eisner (1991) notes that the work "requires the capacity to see, not merely to look" and acknowledges the challenges inherent to enabling others to see those qualities of art that the connoisseur is able to see" (p. 68).

Conclusion

Whereas more traditional professional development modules tend to focus on efficiency and measurable assessment outcomes, literature as curriculum prioritizes personal growth and introspection. This article demonstrates that relevant literary excerpts, images, and dialogue can be useful in eliciting relevant thought-provoking questions and unique insights related to the personal and professional lives of mentors. As the model of literature as curriculum continues to evolve, its central tenet, to foster critical and reflective thinking, remains constant. Although using literature as a mentors' curriculum lacks traditional "evidence" of measurable impact,

in the spirit of aesthetic inquiry and artistic connoisseurship, it is significant to remember Antione de Saint-Exupery's (1943) observation that "it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye" (p. 21).

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