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CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN ART EDUCATION
OPTION 1-Part 1: Personal Narratives

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COURSE INSTRUCTOR: ZOONA KUNDI

SOCRATES

School stories always seem to start with the bell ringing. It's almost like the bell sets the tone for the day. It was the inevitable, the dreaded and the loved but something we, the students and the teachers had no say about. It could rescue one from a sticky situation but it could also put an end to a joyful moment. So, here is another story that starts with the ominous ringing of that school bell.

The bell rang and I stepped into the doorway of the seventh-grade classroom. The boys scrambled to their desks, there was a chant of greeting. I replied with the energy that's present in the first weeks after the holidays. That thrill, which comes with newness but evolves to other sentiments over time. And made my way to the front of the class. The seventh-grade boys were an enthusiastic lot and I usually didn't hear a lot of grumbling or whining. I scanned the faces, yes, they generally seemed to be in a pleasant mood, a few bored and wandering gazes and some restless ones.

And then I saw a new face. Oh. We had a new student. Time for introduction.

"So, we have someone new with us. Hello, I'm Asna, I will be taking your IP (inquiry program) class this year. Are you new in school or just back from the holidays?" I asked.

"What is your name?"

“Socrates,” came the reply.

I gave a little laugh; Oh, I had definitely heard these smart answers before.

“No, no, what is your real name?” I persisted

“Socrates” came the answer again.

“ok, you may be Socrates, but what is your given, your real name?”

“Socrates,” he replied again, with an even gaze. He didn’t seem to be relenting, this might be a difficult one was the first thought that came to my mind.

My exasperation must have been evident on my face because another boy, one of the more outgoing ones of the class chimed in, “it is Socrates, *urdu mein Sucraat kehte hain* (in Urdu we call him *Sukraat*).”

“Hmmm,” not fully convinced, but I let it go. “Ok, so let’s get out our IP folders, please” I said, while I sceptically made my way to the classroom door to look at the list of students’ names. I scanned the list with all the familiar *Hassans* and *Alis*, *Bilals* and *Shayaans*, even a few new names, and amidst them all staring back at me was Socrates Haider.

So yes, I had a Socrates in my class. I went back inside and we started with our activity for that day.

Later talking to my colleagues, we happened to discuss Socrates, and everybody was surprised that I hadn’t heard of him before as he was pretty well known with the teachers because of his name. And the whole episode just went into my anecdote library.

And a few days ago, after my virtual evening class, this little incident awoke in my memory.

But this time, in retrospect, I was horrified. What had I done? I had refused to believe when somebody told me their name. I asked thrice, gave a little laugh, but did not believe the person unless I saw it on an official document. How could I have done this to an adolescent

or to anybody for that matter. Our name is what we are most sure of, identify with, are known with, it is part of us.

How could I have doubted somebody's name.

Yes, in my context it is extremely rare...to encounter such a name. They are usually very contextually, culturally relevant, even if they are new names. I might not have been ready to hear Socrates, but, as a teacher one needs to step in class with an open mind...it might be a name, or an opinion or a perspective that I might not be expecting, but need to be ready for.

And I think this is where it becomes relevant for teacher's role as a learner/co-learner.

A learner's zeal, a learner's thirst lends to the open mindset that teachers can benefit from.

Open to new thoughts and ideas, opinions, perspectives, views and yes, even names. I think the learner's attitude and attributes would also help in bringing that diversity and inclusivity into practise. Ideas of diversity might seem beautiful and honest, and humble but putting it in practice would determine the inclusivity that we aim for, but unintentionally overlook.

Nel Noddings in her book, *"The Challenge to Care in Schools"*, talks about the culture of *care* in schools. What all it entails and how teachers can model it and stimulate a culture for caring that can go beyond the walls of school. It also talks about how the respect we show our students as human beings with their own identities, their own ideas and thoughts can be conducive to how they behave and interact with others, and care for others. As I do believe that these roles need to be part of the general mindset: of a learner, of a carer.

Reference:

Noddings, Nel. *The Challenge to Care in Schools : an Alternative Approach to Education*. New York :Teachers College Press, 2005.

NU?

Trees. Oh, these glorious trees. I spent many hours that year looking out of the windows at these old, sprawling beautiful trees. As I sat in my eight-grade classroom, twenty years ago. The year had just begun and we were getting introduced to all the new teachers and books and time tables. The bell had rung, and very soon we all turned around at a booming enthusiastic and a very sure greeting. And there stood in a red baseball cap, change.

Nu? In yellow lettering the red baseball cap said *Nu?* what is it, is it nut with a missing t? Is this French? Well, we'd get to know soon enough.

And enters Ms Ahmed. She's not a Miss, or a Mrs, but a Ms with z, and that is how I'll always remember her. The fiercely independent, unapologetically confident, amazing woman that walked into my life that day as I sat looking at those glorious trees, and gave me my first taste of change, as a learner.

We had a term full of geography lessons which were different. Still 40 minutes but that time was spent in a blur; talking and discussing weather and climate, clouds and wind patterns, monsoons and its festivals. It was still geography but we were engaged. Before we knew it, it was December, that month of despair and joy: the mid-terms and the holidays.

Right before the midterms, for geography we got a single sheet of key notes. We were told that this was all we needed for the exam. What? I got upset. How will I ever give a hundred mark, one-and-a-half-hour-long exam with one sheet of notes. What about the chapters from the textbooks? What about my class notes? What about the other work we had done? No, as Ms Ahmed insisted, the sheet was all I needed.

And home went a very upset me.

Talked to my mother about how ridiculous it all was. How would we ever do it? Yes, I needed to be sure, and this was anything but. It was different and I wasn't even ready to accept that somebody had my life easier, the change was unsettling and off my mother went, for a meeting with the teacher.

My mother came back reassured. The meeting had helped. "The exam will not be directly from the key notes, they just need to clear about these concepts, the exam will be the application of these concepts to gauge their understanding and not the facts that they can remember." Ms Ahmed and my mother had a little talk about how we were entering the new millennium and how education needed to change. How it might have moved forward from rote learning but still was too dependent on accumulation facts and information rather than its processing. Not only did that get my mother reassured and excited about this new teacher but also helped her in placating my nerves and trying to make me see how it would actually help me.

This was the beginning of the few years I spent studying geography, English literature, general paper with Ms Ahmed. She brought numerous little changes in the school, in our curriculum and they made a big difference. I remember some of my other teachers as well, whose passion and devotion to their profession, whose kindness and empathy, consideration and involvement had made a place in my heart but Ms Ahmed, will always be the one, who brought change. In the way I thought, questioned, and even in the ways I expressed. She helped me learn the power of creativity, a lot of it through the beloved Anne Shirley, not only for art, but for life and all disciplines in it.

She made us question that big divide between art and science. Did disciplines need to be divided as such? Well, she was the embodiment of both, she had double majored in music and geography, not because it had scope but because she loved them both. That's is why we

never did get to know about *NU?*; was it the Greek letter, was it the frequency? the animal? New? Or was it just plain old nut with the missing t.

I share this today because as we discuss education and how it needs to evolve in our context, one definitely needs to address all the stake holders that become part of this process. It is of utmost importance for the students and their parents to become part of this change and that their voice to be heard as well.

Here, I would also like to refer to the text "Teaching to Transgress" by Bell Hooks. Though set in a different context, but it is about the effects of teaching to push boundaries. They talk about boundaries and systems of oppression like racism, sexism, classism but it can be about the boundaries in the realm of thoughts and ideas, notions and views.

Adaptation, is one of the key qualities that helps us navigate in these everchanging landscapes of society, culture, technology, environment etc. But for one to adapt one needs to modify and change, and this can be unsettling. But if addressed properly it can be the propeller.

Reference:

Hooks, Bell. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*.
