

How I Came to Appreciate the Power of Identity in the Classroom

The memories still feel as fresh as if these experiences had occurred yesterday, not 30 years ago. My first year of teaching was likely similar to that of many first year teachers: I had three preps in four different classrooms. Most of the time I was only one day ahead of my students on the content. This was back in the day when beginning teachers did not get mentors, so I was on my own. One of the teachers, in whose classroom I spent one period each day, did not want me to write on the board. I wasn't provided a cart. I was coaching swimming in another district, so that meant I had to leave the building with the students every day so I couldn't meet with students or prep for the next day. It exhausts me just remembering those days. And, I want to go back and apologize to each of the students I had in class that year.

I still remember the feeling I had standing outside my classroom door the first day of my second year of teaching. My day was starting with students in chemistry concepts; a course in which students who had not passed algebra or ninth grade physical science were placed. In addition, this was the course in which students with disabilities were often placed. This course was typically seen as a course that

was difficult to teach, and therefore, no other teacher in my department of 13 teachers wanted to teach it. As the newest teacher in the department who was chemistry certified, I was assigned to teach all of the sections of this course. I had spent much of the summer rethinking the course and how I might better meet the needs of my students.

In reflecting on that section of concepts from my first year it seemed that either I or the students met with frustration every day. I was frustrated by a non-existent curriculum, and a text that was full of activities, but severely lacking in any discussion around the conceptual ideas. As a new teacher, I was still struggling to find a way to have my students learn through activities, to identify the big conceptual takeaways I wanted for my students. I think my students were frustrated by many of the same things. They had to deal with the lessons I developed that didn't meet them where they were or push them appropriately, put up with my inconsistent attempts at managing a classroom, and accept a school-day structure that didn't allow for time to get extra help. In addition, attendance issues caused gaps in their learning that made it difficult for them to understand what I was talking about. I felt ill-prepared to meet the diverse needs of my students and my teaching reflected that.

This reflection about what needed to change got me to recognize that my expectations and norms reflected who I am, the way in I was raised, and my own experiences with schools. Until that point I hadn't deeply considered who all the students in my classes were, the experiences they brought with them to the classroom, and how this might impact the experience we were sharing. One of my first mistakes on the first day of year two occurred during first period. I provided students with safety contracts that told them they needed to be signed by a parent. I was clear that they would not be able to do any labs until this document came back to me, signed. I thought I was being understanding by telling them they had three days to get this done before we did our first lab—proud that I had considered that some students might have parents who worked second or third shift. What was quickly brought to my attention by the head secretary when a student went to her, was that not every student lived with a parent, that some were with other family members or family friends, that some families did not speak/read English, and that some students were emancipated minors. I even had some students who were married and had children. I shifted from relying on parents to do parts of my job (making sure their kids follow safe lab procedures)

to taking responsibility for making sure that all of my students were able to engage in rich learning experiences.

Another thing I spent a lot of time thinking about during that summer following my first year was what I wanted my classroom to look like for my students. How could I set up the physical things in my classroom so my students would have access to the materials they needed, and feel as comfortable as possible in a classroom that had most of the furniture nailed down? I thought about the ways in which I wanted my students to learn, ways that aligned with my understanding of how kids learned best. So, in my second year, I grouped desks together as best I could (a couple of my classes had over 40 students) and worked to establish norms that I hoped would inspire collaboration, respect, and start to shift the responsibility for learning from me to them. Strategies that worked beautifully one day, or in one period, didn't work the next day, or with another class. I opened up with my students when I was frustrated, and encouraged them to do the same. I recognized that they had been telling me a lot the year before with their behaviors, I just hadn't been able to understand what this was telling me about the things I was doing. I learned a lot that year alongside my students.

As I think back on those experiences in my first years of teaching and the many mistakes I made in the interactions I had with my students, the processes I had set up, and the expectations that I had for their learning, I'm amazed at how much I learned. I now recognize my growing understanding of my students and my classroom reflect the role identity plays in the relationships teachers develop with their students. The Cambridge English Dictionary defines identity as "who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others." The understanding that developed for me over the years is that we all have multiple identities that are the result of our lived experiences. These lived experiences may impact us in ways that increase the likelihood we will view future interactions positively, or will find interactions to be threatening. We may feel that we have several identities and these may, or may not, overlap. In any case, we recognize that just as we have identities, those with whom we work (students and teachers) also have identities that may influence the ways in which we interact. As my awareness of my own identity increased, it became more apparent that others may not see me the way I see myself. This understanding, that the world that I see and experience isn't the world others see and experience, changed the way in which I worked with students and teachers.

During the third and fourth years of the Knowles Teaching Fellowship, some of the work we do with Fellows is intended to support them in developing an understanding of their own identities, their students' identities, and how the intersection of teachers' and students' identities shapes students' opportunities to learn¹. Teachers' understanding of the role of identity in classroom relationships is connected to increased access to learning for all students. We know that students who are more engaged in learning learn more. Developing and implementing norms that recognize and support the contributions of all students increases students' academic and social status in the classroom and these norms need to reflect the identities of everyone in the classroom, not just the teacher.

1 We also ask Fellows to consider identity when working with colleagues.