

Whose Lesson is it Anyway?

A Case of Intellectual Ownership

Principles Case Report

For

Linda Darling Hammond

Winter Quarter

2000

[Return to Index](#)

A case of intellectual ownership: How important is it for a teacher to be invested in and have ownership of her curriculum? Can a teacher successfully lead a lesson without first making it intellectually authentic to her own ideals? The environment for this case began in December when my co-operating teacher, Wendy Carr, asked me to substitute for our sophomore U. S. History class. The students would be studying U. S. foreign policy, from the 1800's up to World War One. Ms. Carr had taught these lessons several times before and she offered me an outline of the notes that she had planned to cover and a couple of days of TCI-based activities as support. We met the next day and discussed her essential questions and the key ideas of the unit, Ms. Carr described the key questions that she used as warm-up discussions and they sounded very intriguing to me.

One of the topics that she asked me to have the students discuss was the system of rating countries as first, second and third world. I was concerned that this topic might be offensive to the seven immigrant students in the class. Ms. Carr explained how she normally started with a discussion of birth, death and literacy rates and then had the students provide the input until the class had generated several of the main criteria that would determine where a country would fall on the scale, she then had the students suggest where different countries would be placed in the ratings. This seemed simple enough. She gave me additional input on the other activities and handed me the lesson plans.

I became a teacher by way of a long series of teaching experiences, I had always intended

to become a veterinarian and had worked in a wide variety of positions that involved animals and education. I taught classes and provided informative lectures through my work at zoos, nature centers and the Humane Society. I worked for ten years as a veterinary technician and when I had the opportunity to finish college I came to the realization that I was no longer interested in pursuing veterinary medicine as a career.

I began to consider teaching as a career after I had changed my major to history. I taught learning skills to small student groups in the History department at a community college and I enjoyed the interaction of discussing and learning ideas. As a woman of African-American descent I had experienced public education at a time when there was little cultural relevancy in the classroom, Gloria Ladsen-Billings book *The Dreamkeepers* provided me with a desire to become involved in creating education that was culturally relevant and inclusive. I also felt a personal desire to help students like myself who had not been encouraged to achieve higher education to learn a sense of their own competence. As a student-teacher I had little true classroom experience and I worried that working in the large public classrooms would be very challenging, I was pleased to be placed at Bayside, a predominately African-American school with small class sizes and a sense of community.

Context

Bayside College Preparatory School is a private, non-profit, 7-12th grade school. The school is located in a low income, minority community of twenty-five thousand people. Currently, it is estimated that sixty-five percent of secondary students from this area drop out of high school. The city's students are bused to bordering wealthy communities where racial and economic disparity, distance, tracking and negative peer pressure can all discourage students from completing their education. Bayside school was created with the mission of addressing the conditions that hinder these students from realizing their academic potential and helping them to achieve higher education.

The school opened in September, 1996 with 8 students. This year, the middle school was added, doubling the size of the school from 35 students to 71. There are 49 high school students and 22 middle school students enrolled at the school. There are 6 full-time and 4 part-time high school teachers on staff as well as 2 full-time middle school teachers. This allows an average class size of 15 students per teacher. The student body is predominately African-American and includes fifteen Latino students. There are also five Fijian/East Indian students and one Tongan.

The Bayside campus is on a 1.6 acre parcel located in the community that it serves. There is a large central lawn and pathways that lead among the buildings. The classrooms are in modular buildings that have foundations, covered walkways and landscaping. There are eight classrooms distributed throughout the four modular buildings. There are also two computer labs, a student lounge, and a locker room. The largest building on the site is a regulation basketball gym that has a large capacity multi-purpose room/ dining area.

Bayside College Preparatory School has a very unique dynamic when it comes to creating

a strong school and classroom community. Students who want to attend Bayside go through a demanding admission process that includes a review of prior grades and attendance, application essay responses, and interviews with students and their families

Bayside students provide school tours and are sometimes shadowed by potential new students. The students are an integral part of the school fund-raising, many of them speak to groups at fund-raisers and informational meetings. There are all-family school barbecues and parent volunteers provide school clean-up and repairs. The students also assist with the set-up and arrangement of the classrooms for Fall, which helps to create a strong sense of involvement and increased school pride.

The involvement of the students has created an atmosphere at Bayside that is respectful, nurturing and very conducive to learning. Teachers are given time to meet and plan across the curriculum. Expected Schoolwide Learning Results have been established and included in curriculum plans so that all classes can help to provide necessary skills. The small school size, influence of a family-like grouping and teacher-continuity help to provide a feeling of community.

The culture of the classroom is also very strongly knit. The size of the freshman and sophomore class is small and the students travel to most of their classes together throughout the day. Bayside classes are untracked unless a student has a native language designation or advanced algebra preparation. The sense of affiliation seems strong for most of the students and the few that are outside the primary friendship groups appear to have established relationships with teachers, tutors, siblings and friends in other class levels.

U. S. History is a sophomore class and it consists of 7 boys and 6 girls. The ethnic makeup of the class is 7 African-Americans (one is a recent immigrant from Africa), 5 Hispanics and one East Indian. We use *American Odyssey* by Gary Nash as our course textbook, however most of the class readings are collected from various sources to fit our needs. The readings are Xeroxed and handed out. Classes at Bayside are taught in blocks and U. S. History begins at 9:30 a.m. on Monday and at 9:45 a.m. on Wednesday and Friday. The class lasts for 45 minutes on Monday and 90 minutes on Wednesday and Friday.

Six of the students in U.S. History are English Language Learners, but three seem to have a high level of spoken proficiency which is reflected in their written homework. Three others are currently performing at a lower level of comprehension, and they have tutors and mentors to assist them with their studies. This is the second year that the students in this class have been together and they all know each other extremely well. Three of the boys play on the boys basketball team together and two of the girls are members of the women's team.

One group of three Latina girls are such close friends that the students refer to them jointly as Sam, the combination of their individual initials. Within the class there are several male students who spend a lot of time talking at their table at the front of class, I

often have to ask them to stop talking during class time. One of these four students has reading and writing difficulties, another is a generally good but very sociable student of East Indian heritage and the third is an ESL Latino male who has a strong English comprehension.

The class also contains three students who are outstanding in their ability to synthesize information and provide very insightful ideas and opinions on a topic. One is an African-American boy who is admired schoolwide for his intelligence although he rarely completes his homework in his classes and he does not have any close friendships at the school. A female student who was born in the Congo and immigrated to the U. S. at a young age excels at providing interesting ideas during discussions although she practically refuses to do groupwork and she has been known to use her backpack as a shield while she draws during class.

Another of the very participatory students is one of the girls from the group Sam. Anna is a great source of information for the class and she also provides language support for the three Hispanic ESL students that she sits with. There are five students who provide great answers when they are called on, two students that volunteer their ideas frequently and three that are very shy and hesitant to speak in class.

In the classroom, the students typically sit at tables of two. There are six tables in the classroom and two additional desks. Due to the small size of the room, the layout of the tables is teacher-focused. The classroom walls are decorated with student work and teaching materials and the floor of the room is carpeted. There are two white boards and two bulletin boards in the room. The classroom is also equipped with a television, video cassette recorder and an overhead projector.

Narrative

At the time I had been focused on the unit I was teaching in our World History class and I simply read all the information that Ms. Carr had given me and prepared two lectures to fit the notes that she had already outlined. I created a 30 minute lecture on U. S. Territorial expansion from the 1800's to the end of the Spanish American war and an additional fifteen minutes about the foreign policies of Roosevelt, Taft and Wilson.

As I plan my lessons, I try to prepare questions that will generate student answers and provide the framework for the discussion. My ideal is to have students provide thoughtful ideas about the readings, activities and research that we have done and to assemble this information in a way that allows the students to uncover the underlying essential question of the lesson. My intention is to bring the students to a greater awareness of the issues that we are discussing through questioning and by helping them to connect their ideas to the essential ideas of the class.

As I prepared for the lesson I considered my feelings about the topic that I would be teaching. I believe that the United States' role as a world power and the country's often

discriminatory and exploitative foreign policy decisions are a key educational point in the understanding of United States history. In order to truly understand the most basic tenets of our democratic government, students should be brought to an understanding of its failings. Studying foreign policy can allow an opportunity to learn about the diversity of the world's cultures and it helps students to understand the history of interactions between the United States and different countries.

In planning to teach U. S. foreign policy to my United States History class, My co-operating teacher had provided me with an essential question "Is the United States' foreign policy truly Democratic?" Following Dewey's principle of the progressive organization of subject matter, Ms. Carr had created a combination of discussions, activities and lectures that would allow students to uncover for themselves their own answers to this question. The students' final assessment would include gathering information from case studies in groups of two and presenting a summary of their information with two metaphors illustrating the United States' treatment of other countries from two perspectives.

The first day of this mini-unit, Friday, I began with a small discussion. The opening question was; Do we need to learn a foreign language or is English enough? As I prepared to start this unit, I tried several plans for introducing this question but it still felt false to me. My dilemma was that I felt that the question was not relevant to my students. I see primary languages as very important to a person's sense of identity and community and I thought the question failed to consider the value of other languages. Seven of my students are multi-lingual and I did not believe that they would be likely to argue for English as the only language.

When my C.T. and I had talked about this topic her idea had been to challenge the students' belief that people from other countries should learn to speak like us. This was intended to cause the class to wonder why English is already spoken in many countries of the world. By the first day of the lesson, I still was not comfortable with the original question and I wasn't sure how I could best alter it.

I was still considering how to present the key question as I struck up a conversation before class with several of my students about how many languages they spoke, as the rest of the class arrived they also joined in and I began to list the classroom's language list on the board. As the class shared their multi-lingual experiences we came to a discussion of a better question; Was it important for people of other countries to learn English and why? The students' participation had shaped the topic, making it much more relevant to their needs and in the end, they seemed to achieve a better understanding from their involvement. I felt that the new question was an improvement because it was student-generated and it had more relevance to their situation and interests.

I began to write down the student-generated list of reasons to learn English. After they had all added a few I asked them to name some countries that spoke some form of English as their primary language. The class struggled after naming a few countries. I began to name

countries and ask the students to call out what language was spoken in them until we had listed several. One student had seen the movie *Braveheart* and she added a description of Scotland as an example of colonization. This led to a brief discussion of former English colonies and a timeline of the millennium which showed the U. S. in existence for only 220 years.

We next turned to the idea of first, second and third-world countries. I was concerned about teaching this topic because five of my students were from Mexico and it was rated as a second- or third-world country. I was personally uncomfortable with this euro-centric country rating system and I was worried about how I could best teach it without alienating my students. I do believe that cultural literacy, as described by E. D. Hirsch, should be incorporated into lessons in order to counteract the gatekeeping trend of standardized tests. I was aware that a knowledge of the ranking system of first-, second- and third- world countries was important for the students' development of cultural literacy, so I had decided to plunge into the topic.

I first talked about how the westernized countries had arbitrarily created the rating system in which industrialization was a positive measure. Then we began looking at the infant mortality and literacy rates of several countries and we talked about infrastructure and industrialization. The students then suggested countries to include in the three categories as well as reasons for their inclusion on the list. They easily suggested several European countries as first world and they tried to add the continent of Africa as a third world example, I asked for individual African countries that they might add and they suggested two; Ethiopia and Nigeria. They ran out of suggestions.

This part of the lesson did not run as smoothly as the earlier discussion and I realized that I had been too dependent on the student's prior knowledge. I knew that they had taken World History last year and I thought that they would be familiar with the lifestyles in several different countries. We had not brainstormed information and I was not sure what they did know. I tried making suggestions about what they knew of other countries from news stories. Unfortunately this led to an unbalanced discussion of countries that had suffered famines and several of the student's personal experiences in Mexico, precisely the stereotypical evidence that I was trying to avoid.

The in-class assignment for the day was a TCI foreign policy continuum assignment. The activity provided paragraphs that describe first world/ third world foreign policy actions in different countries. Students were to read the paragraphs and determine where each situation should be placed on a continuum that stretched from isolationism to imperialism. The students worked in groups, reading descriptions of the world powers' actions and discussing where to they should be on the continuum. When they were finished, we reviewed their results in class. Each student read one of their answers out loud and gave their justification for their answer. Some of the students debated their placements and we tried to reach a consensus as a class. This part of the class took longer than I thought and I quickly reviewed my lesson plan. I had not covered everything that I had planned for the day and I was pushed for time.

I needed to include the information on the "how" and "why" of U.S. territorial expansion in the 1800's, I decided to try to fit in as much of it as I could before the class time ended. I started the lecture by questioning the students about things we had previously studied in class. I asked "What were some ways that the U.S. has gained territory?" and "Why did they want it?" The class was silent. I had to call on students and few of them answered, a couple of the responses were not pertinent to the discussion. Finally, I chose to explain the "How" and "Why" so I could move on to prediction questions. "So, now that the U.S. reaches from sea to sea, where else might they look for new markets?" No one raised their hand. I glanced at the clock and saw that I had fifteen minutes of class left and I was supposed to lecture all the way through to the United States' acquisition of the Philippines.

I realized that I needed to speed up my lecture but I wanted to maintain at least some student participation. The students would get very bored and restless if they didn't feel vested in the information process. I called on a student and asked questions of the class. As I dredged the class for more student input, few of the answers seemed to fit and the lecture became painfully slow. Finally, I began to skip the questions that I had written down. I moved ahead through the lecture without having the students repeat ideas back to me. The students did appear to be copying the notes from the board and I was willing to accept this as proof that they were comprehending the lecture.

As I hurried along I stopped asking directed questions, I merely paused momentarily and asked "any questions?" I now realize that this phrase can be said in a manner that is guaranteed to stop any student questions dead in their tracks. I chose a stopping point in the lecture and pushed to get there by the end of class. My lesson plans included essential questions and layers of content, but I found myself teaching in a more restrained and expedient style in my classroom. I had chosen to decrease the amount of student input in favor of getting through the lesson plan.

When the class was over I graded the foreign policy continuum papers and I discovered that most of the students appeared to understand the concept of imperialism. Each answer had required a one sentence explanation of the reason why the students had rated the action as more imperialistic or isolationist. The most common mistake was that students had not gone back and checked their answers against the results that they had already placed on the continuum, so that their final placement order had been out of context with the answers on either side of it.

For example, a student might have read about a country that had colonized another country and chose to place it close to the imperialistic side of the spectrum. Then, as they read another outline that described a country assisting another in a time of war, they would put it closer to the imperialistic marker than the they had put the more imperialistic action. This may mean that my directions were confusing or that the students hadn't fully understood the continuum concept. My in-class review and the written work did seem to show that the students had comprehended the content ideas that we had covered so far.

On the following Monday, I began the rest of the lecture on U.S. territorial expansion in Cuba and the Philippines. I had written out lecture notes that provided me with a script of the notes that I wanted to write on the board as well as supplementary information and notes of previous in-class activities to refer to. I generally write the outline notes on the board while I use my "filler" notes and references to call on students for input or to provide more information myself. Typically my notes include a lot of questions and tidbits of interesting information that I would like to add during the lecture. I also record the names of students that worked on researching a particular subject area so that I can call on them to provide more depth (for example, "Demont researched T. Roosevelt).

Monday was a 45 minute day and we had planned to have the students read current foreign policy articles that we could discuss. My co-operating teacher had returned and I had discussed my lecture dilemma with her in the few minutes before class. Ms. Carr explained that there are some aspects of content that "you just have to get out there". She said that I might try just presenting the information and then watch to see how the lecture information would reappear in the following activities.

The U.S. territorial expansion lecture needed to be finished, so I decided to start it at the beginning of class and move to the articles afterwards. I began with a review; I had the students get out their notes and I asked them questions about the previous lecture. The students remembered that "negotiations," "war" and "force" were the "how" and that "commercial interest" and "land" were the "why" of territorial expansion.

The review was going well and I felt that we were just about ready to move into the new material when I asked one of the students to describe one of the ways that the U. S. had taken land by force. "I don't know" was the reply. I tried to change the question; "remember when we learned about Thomas Jefferson getting control of the Louisiana territory from France, how did he get that land?" There was no answer. Another student raised her hand and said "Manifest Destiny." I explained how the idea of Manifest Destiny was important to territorial expansion and I added a description of the negotiation of the Louisiana purchase but I was worried that the earlier information had been too confusing.

I questioned the students about the earlier part of the lecture. Most of the students had the outline notes in their notebooks, but several of them seemed unable to recall the additional information that had been connected to the notes. Again I had to make a decision whether or not to stop and review the information or finish the new lecture. They were also still gathering information for their foreign policy presentations and I decided that the idea of territorial expansion could be reviewed when they began the presentations of their metaphors.

As I moved to the new material, I began to modify the lecture to draw more information from the students; "When the *Maine* exploded, who do you think would have been blamed?" "Why?" The students began to provide answers and we discussed why the U. S. would blame Spain. Yellow Journalism seemed to strike a chord as the students brainstormed made-up headlines that would help to sell papers. They laughed when I

confirmed that, indeed, Hearst and Pulitzer became "hella" rich from their news empires. The students were very involved, they had begun to ask questions that went beyond the scope of the lecture and most of the class was participating. As class ended, I promised to find out the current monetary value of the Pulitzer prize. We had not gotten to the Foreign policy articles and I had even failed to complete the Foreign Policy lecture. My original 45 minutes of lecture material was going to have to come back for a third day!

During class, I had handed out the readings for the case study metaphor presentations. Ms. Carr and I had planned that the students would work on these in class on Wednesday and Friday. The groups worked well on Wednesday and one group was ready to present on Friday. Their metaphor was great and they did a nice job of summarizing the U. S. take over of the Philippines.

This was the last day of class before the Christmas break, which gave me lots of time to reflect on what had gone wrong with the earlier part of the lecture, but little feedback. Remembering the increased student participation on Monday, I hazarded a guess that this more interactive lecture would be easier for the students to remember. But what about my 45 minute timeline? My Co-operating teacher had said that she usually spent thirty minutes on the lecture information and then moved on to the activities. The lecture was important, but if it took too long it hampered the variety of activities and performances that had been created to support it.

I was still concerned about the student's understanding of the key ideas. Their confusion over Manifest Destiny had surprised me and I was unsure if they really understood any of the ideas of my "talking-at-them" lecture of the Spanish American War. I was sure that the story of *the Maine* and yellow journalism had generated more interest, but I don't believe that the students could see how this connected to the essential question of U. S. Foreign Policy.

This caused me to wonder, should I just put the lecture information out there and expect the later activities to help create understanding or was it more important to create a strong foundation for the students to add on to? Was my lecture simply a fragment that alluded to an essential understanding that would develop as it was connected to other areas of learning or was it basic information that scaffolded students for the information that was to come later? The Foreign Policy unit had been created with both an essential idea and several layers of scaffolding imbedded in it. My confusion was that I felt there was a need for students to understand some of the basic points of the lecture in order to gain understanding from the rest of the unit.

When the Christmas break ended, we had a day and a half of group presentations. As the students described American actions in several countries, they showed their understanding of U.S. foreign policy as often being a less-than-democratic action and their metaphors clearly expressed the idea of American self-interest. On Wednesday afternoon I was prepared to finish the foreign policy lecture.

The remaining section of the lecture was a chronology of the foreign policies Roosevelt, Taft and Wilson. I quickly summarized the background of each man and then wrote their policy on the board. I asked "What might 'speak softly and carry a big stick' mean?", the students provided the ideas and the lecture finished quickly. I realized that ultimately, the combination of scaffolding and essential ideas had pulled through, although I still felt very controlled by time. It bothered me that there are those parts that you "just have to get out there" even when it seems that no one is understanding.

Analysis

So what do I think was going on in my lesson plan? Well, several things really. First there were my unresolved issues over how to present historical information that might imply that some countries or people were considered to be inferior to the United States. Because of my own experience in secondary school, where African-Americans were presented as slaves or occasional ornaments to the larger picture of European-dominated American History, I wanted to avoid presenting other countries in a non-respectful manner. I believe that I should have clearly considered my feelings before I taught some of these activities.

Because of my conflicted feelings, I had not taken ownership of the lesson. If I had spent some time working with the lesson, I might have created ways to examine some of the issues from a perspective that allowed students to develop empathy and understanding for the different countries that we would be examining. I could have also prepared some readings or graphs for the students to examine, providing them with balanced information is the best way to avoid the more stereotypical discussion that resulted. Perhaps then we might "discover" aspects of Western culture within that society and question how it got there.

In hindsight, I realize that the discomfort that I felt over the discussions of English as a dominant language and the act of rating countries as third world could have been a good starting point for those two discussions. I simply might have shared my own feelings and then asked the students to share theirs as we learned more about how these situations came to exist. I think of J. S. Bruner's (1960) ideas on teaching in an intellectually honest manner. If I had offered my students more intellectual honesty, then we might have explored our understanding of these situations together.

My other problem with this particular lesson was that I had issues with time and the content of the lecture itself. I recognize that, at several points, there were moments where I had to make a clear decision between stopping the lecture to explain an idea that the students had not seemed to fully comprehend or forging ahead with the information in order to finish in time and trust in the later activities to provide the needed information. This dilemma reminded me of the quandary of Deborah Loewenberg Ball when she considers "how much should I let students flounder? (Ball, 1993)" She examines the delicate balance between explanations, modeling and pointed questions, had not considered modeling or thinking out loud to help the students resolve their confusion. Samuel S. Wineburg and Suzanne Wilson describe effective teaching as including student self reliance

(Wineburg & Wilson, 1998) I might have perpetuated this by giving the students the opportunity to look up some examples or to poll each other for ideas as options to simply providing an explanation.

Another improvement might be rethinking the way that I stage the information that I present, perhaps I am providing too many important ideas to the students before I have actually helped them to have an interest in the topic. Without interest-relevance the students have little incentive to try to understand the ideas. Lee Shulman and Cathy Ringstaff describe the process of tuning that must occur to synthesize new information with previous knowledge (Shulman & Ringstaff, 24), It is also likely that I was asking the students to provide input on information that they had not had enough time to process.

I realize that changes in the lecture format, a more interactive style, and more frequent checking for understanding could help to resolve some of these situations. I also considered having a class activity that refreshed the student's note taking skills as well as assigning the students to create the in-class review. In addition, I could have asked my co-operating teacher to identify the key ideas that would be on the test, this would allow me to skip over less important ideas and create more flexibility in case I needed to "edit for time."

I understand that Wigen's theory of uncoverage is an important aspect of providing true comprehension for a student, yet I find that there are times when I simply want to provide the student with the answer so that I can finish the lesson before the end of class. I am forever conflicted when a small piece of the lesson suddenly appears to be a large point of confusion for several members of the class. It is difficult to decide whether it is important to spend the time to assure complete comprehension or to move on to the main idea that the students need to understand before their next assignment. Now as I review lesson plans, I have begun to pay attention to the different steps that students will have to understand in order to comprehend an idea. My plan is to identify the most important ideas so that I will have pre-assessed what ideas can be skipped during one lesson and re-approached during another. This should allow me to try to maintain my basic lesson plan and still find time to make connections between student ideas and the discussion.

Works Cited:

Ball, D.L. (1993). With an eye on the mathematical horizon: Dilemmas of teaching Elementary school mathematics. Elementary School Journal. 93 (4). pp. 373-97.

Bruner, J. S. (1960). The Process of Education. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Ch 1-3.

Ladsen-Billings, G. (1994). The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.

Shulman, L S. and Ringstaff, C. (1986). Current research in the psychology of teaching and learning. In A. Bork & H. Weinstock (Eds.), Designing computer-based Learning Materials, pp.1-31.

Wineburg, S. and Wilson, s. (1998). Models of wisdom in the teaching of history. Phi Delta Kappan 70 (1). pp. 50-58

[Return to Index](#)
[Top of the Page](#)