

Identity: Lessons Learned from Peter

Debra Paxton-Buursma

“I am still trying to figure out who I am.” Peter’s parting words at the end of our last interview illustrate the important role identity plays in our lives. I interviewed Peter when he was 26 years old, 18 years after I taught him and his fellow third graders multiplication, division and how to write in paragraphs. That year, Peter was diagnosed with learning disabilities; I was certified to teach students with LD. Peter and I learned from one another. Both in third grade, and recently, Peter voiced lessons influential to my understanding of teaching, learning, and more specifically, the developing view of oneself as a reader, writer, speaker, problem-solver, and thinker.

Many of Peter’s lessons, also articulated in professional and research literature, are worth sharing. This article explores three lessons provided by Peter and others within the field of learning disabilities. Lesson 1: Teachers implement practices for teaching critical life-long skills in literacy, mathematics, and thinking; however, those practices also shape a learner’s identity. A view of oneself, constructed in and out of school, becomes a critical part of the tool-kit learners bring into adulthood. Lesson 2: Learners who question their capacity for learning or find themselves on the margins of learning may find ways to further distance themselves from learning opportunities. Lesson 3: Students identified with learning disabilities offer tremendous learning gifts that teachers can capitalize on for helping others learn and for shaping balanced identities.

Lesson 1: Messages Embedded in Teaching/Learning Practices Shape Identity

Learner identity is not a new topic in education; however, identity studies including young adults identified with learning disabilities through narrative and interview are relatively recent (Rodis, Garrod & Boscardin, 2001, Hellendoorn, & Ruijssenaars, 2000; McNulty, 2003). In addition, new identity studies emerging in other fields have also helped educators explore learner identity as developed within social interactions rather than as developed at specific ages or stages (Hehir, 2006; Wenger, 1998). Wenger suggests that, "learning transforms our identities: it transforms our ability to participate in the world by changing all at once who we are, our practices, and our communities" (1998, p.226). The concept that a learner’s identity is dynamically co-constructed over time by people, place, and events holds significant implications as educators reflect and reconsider what is and isn’t working in teaching and schooling practices.

While identity research raises more questions than answers, a few points are worth noting. In particular, school practices intended to teach basic – and necessary – knowledge and skills, may also unintentionally construct positive and/or negative aspects of a learner’s identity (Mariage, Paxton-Buursma, Bouck, 2004; Reid & Valle, 2004). Peter suggests in his interview that he was excited to learn and saw himself as “smart” until he entered school; somewhere, along the way, Peter’s view of himself changed. Peter’s cartoon drawings and journals often graphically depicted Peter as a victim to the monster named school.

As educators and parents, we need to *continuously monitor* not only knowledge and skill development, but also how a learner sees himself during and after our learning activities. Students may tell us directly, or as in Peter's case, they may speak indirectly through drawings, journals, and stories. Students may easily believe that the learning struggle is their fault, without considering that learning occurs within a teaching-learning relationship between learners, teachers, and texts. It may never occur to a learner that teachers also hold responsibility for implementing accessible teaching/learning opportunities. When students see learning as a trial and error exploration between people and complex ideas, issues, and problems, they are given the opportunity to challenge their own views of deficiency, see the complex interplay of strengths and weaknesses in all learning endeavors, and develop resilience in the face of struggle. Struggle characterized by shame and blame rather than with opportunities for empowerment may result in negative self-esteem, and essential questions of worth may carry across schooling experiences and well into adult jobs and relationships (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2003; Hellendoorn & Ruijsenaars, 2000, McNulty, 2003).

Lesson 2: Keep Students in the Game

Peter helped me see just how quickly and how deeply students who struggle may retreat from the learning game. Once learners begin to see themselves as unable to learn easily or well, they may accept and add to the shaping of self as incapable or even unworthy. When an identity involves more disability than ability, students may also find it difficult to take risks necessary for deep learning. Sophisticated patterns of avoidance, withdrawal, or retreat may occupy a significant portion of a student's energy and mind power. Peter's written description of school suggests that he felt he was incapable of learning and responded by retreating from the learning game already in first grade. He writes about a janitor who tried to help him with his math, "Kind, though unwitting soul that he was, he stopped for awhile and tried to help, tried to teach me, but was eventually himself perplexed by the abnormalities of my mind and moved on." Peter used identity eyes of deficiency to imagine how others looked at him, and created safe places to retreat. Reflecting on his school experiences, he identified, in writing, one way he retreated, "My presence is absent from the classroom. My desk is empty. Where have I gone? My survival instincts have delivered me into safety. I've retreated back into the crystalline tunnels of my mind; been swallowed up by my own imagination." Peter's retreat continued in various ways over the years. Yet, while retreating, he consistently yet indirectly tried to let teachers know through drawings, journals, and stories that school had become a place where he felt threatened as a learner rather than nurtured.

What was striking in Peter's case was that it took him years to discover – and actually believe – that while he struggled in some academic areas, he could do school tasks. Peter describes quitting school and ending up at the library to keep warm. Not wanting to look like a bum, Peter would pull books off the shelf and read them, discovering that he could read, understand, and even write like published authors. Peter suggests this as a critical turning point in his identity, "but when I started to read real writers ... I really came alive. ... and I realized that I could write and I could do anything because it was a school thing. Reading and writing was a school thing

and I could do that. Once I knew that, I loved that I could do what I needed to do.” After that, Peter returned to school and excelled in subjects that required reading and writing.

Students may, on their own, retreat, but our school practices might also unintentionally reinforce a student’s withdrawal or retreat. Some of our practices may cause students to see themselves positioned on the margins or even excluded from the learning game (Collins, 2003; Rodis et al., 2001). When students find themselves on the sidelines of the learning game, motivation, persistence, and hope may diminish. As we work to develop capacity in all learners, we may find it useful to remember that students may be writing *identity story scripts* that involve us and themselves in ways that may threaten productive engagement in learning opportunities. We can help students, and students can help us, by creating space for listening to their stories. Student passive or assertive withdrawal and retreat may not be fully accurate or may not represent what the student really wants – to be part of the learning game. One skill we can provide for learners at any age is how to share with others their perceptions and how to disrupt patterns of withdrawal and retreat by engaging them actively and authentically in learning opportunities (Dole, 2001).

Lesson 3: Find Creative ways to Access and Celebrate Learner Ability

Sometimes our own view of what learners can or can’t do causes us to miss or diminish learning opportunities. In fourth grade, Peter was sent out of class and down to the resource room for doodling during the lesson on idioms. His doodles, which were thrown in the trash, were retrieved by the resource room teacher. What she found in those doodles were highly sophisticated drawings that captured excellent examples of idioms. Learner mistakes and misbehaviors can create windows through which teachers (and parents) will be able to see student strength, capacity, and gift. Peter’s teacher could have positively positioned Peter at the center of the learning game – even as a leader in the learning game – by using his sketches as a learning tool to help others understand more deeply the concept of idioms. All students – and sometimes especially students with learning disabilities – offer unique and important gifts in making meaning in the world. Those gifts, when explored creatively, may extend learning possibilities for many in the learning community.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act suggests that too often we limit learning opportunities for students due to the “soft bigotry of low expectations.” Examining and challenging our own perceptions about learners capacity may be necessary in order to fully provide students with full access to the general curriculum. Witherell & Rodis state it well:

...teachers are challenged to do a great deal, ranging from openly deconstructing notions of ableism and disability to educating all students in a frame of mind that encourages self-knowledge, self-belief, a vigorous work ethic, and a clear sense of their right to a nourishing, substantive education. It is equally important to remember that these same students may stand out as extraordinarily competent in any number of other areas. If we are to compare students... it is only fair to look also for the ways in which [students with

learning disabilities] are more able, wise, passionate, knowledgeable, and skilled than their peers. If we do not search, affirm, and celebrate these strengths, we constrain students' opportunities for using...competency as springboards for academic success and self-esteem....these strengths are often key to students' forming a future sense of identity (2001, p. 171-172).

As I talk with special and general education teachers, they often wonder if they have to relinquish creativity involved in curricular and instructional design given the current emphasis on implementing evidence-based practices in order to meet the expectations of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or new initiatives such as Response to Intervention (RtI). Unfortunately, too often policies informing our practices incite fear, rather than cultivate the creative use of teachers' professional knowledge, skill, and care toward responsive, accessible teaching-learning opportunities. Educational research suggests that excellent evidenced-based teaching curricula and tools do not stand alone, but require teachers who thoughtfully and carefully link program and strategies to deep knowledge about their students, learning theories and contextual factors. In addition, our reflective practices must include consideration of the potential effect our pedagogical decisions have on student and teacher perceptions. As we design, implement and revise new strategies and programs intended to engage all learners, may we also make space to listen and respond to the shaping identity of the Peters in our midst.

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