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# Deep Learning With Beautiful Questions: Student Engagement and Teacher Renewal

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# DEEP LEARNING WITH BEAUTIFUL QUESTIONS: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND TEACHER RENEWAL

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*I believe that I have a responsibility as an educator to place a critical lens on our teaching to provide opportunities for students to learn multiple perspectives, practice cultural empathy, and learn true histories.*

**Kerri Lawrence, November 2012**

## Introduction

Some of us get into the business of teaching because we want to make a difference — in our students and in society. For the first author of this paper, the motivation for choosing a profession with the potential for transformative engagement in solving the complex and challenging problems that face humanity and the planet is simple — I want to make a positive difference, to create a little more peace and justice in this oft violent world. Clarity about what that means has arisen in decades of contemplation about what works well to promote deep learning in the classroom and what lines of academic inquiry make me feel whole — goals that I often fall short of achieving. Parker Palmer's (1997) words in "The Heart of a Teacher" resonate with me on a deep level:

I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illumined by the lightning-life of the mind– then teaching is the finest work I know" (p. 1). Available at:http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/events/afc99/articles/heartof.pdf

Yet there are moments of despair when teaching as well. I am disheartened by lackluster student engagement and my own waning passion and enthusiasm when the thicket of coverage in my foundations of education and diversity courses threatens to squelch the flames of deep learning. I also struggle to connect my teaching to my research passions — namely deep learning through transformative multicultural education and peace education. What I have learned along the way is that of utmost importance is asking good questions in my work; questions that ignite passion and cultivate deep learning in both teaching and research. Good *quest*ions send us on a quest to care, to know, to do good things.

This scholarly reflection will explore deep learning and deep teaching with beautiful, foundational course questions. The focus will be on teacher (Ed Brantmeier) and student (Kerri Lawrence) meaning-making from engaging with beautiful questions when exploring peace education content as part of a masters level cross-cultural education course at James Madison University in 2012. In specific, Ed Brantmeier speaks to his renewal as a teacher-scholar and

Kerri speaks to her deep learning and application of critical peace education as a first year, elementary classroom teacher.

**Deep Learning, Deep Teaching**

Good teachers join self, subject, and students in the fabric of life because they teach from an integral and undivided self; they manifest in their own lives, and evoke in their students, a "capacity for connectedness." (Palmer, 1997 p. 2).

Parker Palmer's words here suggest connecting self, subject, and students in a deepened learning process that results in wholeness and connectedness — an ideal for both teachers and students. Connecting my scholarship and student learning has been and uphill struggle given I focus on peace education in the United States, a place with a history that deems the term 'peace' as both politically and socially suspect (Stomfay-Stitz, 1993; Boulding, 2000). In addition to working with politically suspect content, I work in teacher education, an academic area aimed at cultivating future teachers for their roles as what Emile Durkheim categorized as moral agents of the state. Teacher education, in particular, has been observed to reproduce status quo within societies, in part, by legitimizing the "official knowledge" of the power elite (Apple, 200).

Certain types of "official knowledge" become legitimized, prioritized, and reinforced through using the directive center of schools and elite schools of education to create conditions where the "official knowledge" of the state, often influenced by the values and norms of the power elite in society, — saturates everyday commonsense notions of reality; Gramsci (2010) calls this quite and seemingly *natural* saturation process hegemony. Deep learning questions the norm — it guides both teachers and students to deconstruct and reconstruct reality anew.

Fusing self, subject, and student learning when the subject is politically suspect and the system of teacher education leans toward status quo reproduction tends to be a daunting task, that has left me hollow at moments over the last ten years. I have doubted that my work has been for little or nothing. My hope and ambition have been tested through engagement with the constraints of an education system fixated on measurement, outcomes, and adequate yearly progress. Yet there is hope — in learning that matters and teaching that makes a difference.

What is deep teaching? In my own consideration, deep teaching is meaningful, both personal and connective, for students and the teachers, and relevant — meaning that it is fused to real world challenges. Deep teaching engages the person in the process and the content. Deep teaching connects the personal to the local and to the global. Deep teaching makes a difference on students' worldview, value frameworks, and habits of behavior for the long term. Deep teaching promotes sticky learning — the stuff that stays with one for years to come. Fink (2003) refers to this as learning that endures. Sticky learning stems from not only a cognitive repertoire of new knowledge or skills to do great things in the world, but also an emotional connection and sense of caring for and about content and the world. We have built amazing things with our minds and hands, yet has humanity as of recent fallen short to educate and cultivate the finer qualities of the heart? Do we teach to promote both caring for and caring about (Noddings, 1993) the pressing concerns and realities faced by humanity and the planet?

In the context of teaching ecology, Giuliano (2009) considers deep teaching to be about the process of learning itself, about life-long learning, and about connection and interdependence. The self is considered in relationship to the whole, and the *relationship* of the parts to the whole and the whole to the parts becomes a serious line of inquiry. Why should one strive toward deep teaching? Miller (2009) maintains, "It is *for* deep teaching that many educators enter the classroom; *by it* do students feel wholly welcomed into the classroom; and *from it* do students ultimately emerge as citizens interested and engaged, and honoring of the world. (p. 2711). Deep teaching in this conception results in an interested and engaged citizenry — core requirements for a vibrant, pluralistic, democratic society that holds the tensions of governance and individual liberties in dynamic engagement and interplay.

For some educators, the motivation to teach is inextricably linked to a passion for learning. Deep learning is beyond surface or strategic learning, learning for the grade or to just get by. Deep learning, according to Ken Bain, is "learning that involves conceptual understanding and critical thinking and leads to "adaptive expertise" (Bruff, 2011 p. 1). Adaptive expertise allows the individual to be flexible and fluid, responsive to contextual needs while applying concepts and critical thinking skills to real world problems of prime importance. In the past, I have asserted that "adaptive intelligence"[1]— the ability to modify and adjust to the changing dynamics and landscapes of the classroom — is pivotal for teacher success in a changing world. Deep learning is learning that sticks and can be applied to contexts where the stakes are high, and the problems are messy. Deep learning is about enduring learning; it's what sticks after years pass. Deep learning, like deep teaching, is learning that is meaningful (personal and connective) and relevant to real world issues.

The question naturally then arises, how do we promote sticky learning for our students in our courses? One answer just might be found in the asking of good questions.

**Beautiful Questions as Anchors of Inquiry**

What beautiful questions ignite our learning and goad teachers and students to "go deep" in their learning? As a first-year professor at Saint Louis University in 2005, I heard Ken Bain speak from his book *What the Best College Teachers Do* to an audience of professors and administrators. A specific pedagogical practice stuck with me that day. Ken suggested that many of the best college teachers provide overarching, beautiful questions that explicitly frame their courses. I was on the edge of my seat and listening, ready to incorporate that practice into the doctoral and undergraduate courses I was teaching at that time. In his book, Bain (2004) identifies elements of "the promising syllabus":

What kind of questions would it [the course] help students answer?"

What kind of intellectual, physical, emotional, or social abilities would it help them develop? (pp. 74-75)

Beautiful *quest*ions invite students on a quest into a new, exciting, scary, and illuminating world of thinking, feeling, and doing. These beautiful questions serve as overarching, anchors for inquiry for a particular course and are linked to the larger pursuits of an academic discipline.

As a teacher, I had normally been aware of the beautiful questions undergirding the courses that I was teaching at the time — graduate level philosophy of education and curriculum courses and undergraduate level cultural diversity and methods of teaching courses— yet I had never made them explicit to my students. Making the beautiful, foundational course questions explicit to my students and using those questions as both the first writing assignment and the final exam for my courses has anchored student learning in my courses since hearing Ken Bain talk in Saint Louis in 2005. I have practiced using beautiful, foundational course questions in my teaching for seven years now, with varying and mixed results.

**Beautiful Questions Integrated into Diversity Courses**

I have found that framing the beautiful, foundational questions for my courses explicitly for students draws them into the most important questions of the course and allows them to go deep. Even when the coverage of content is often cajoling me to move quickly rather than to go deep, the foundational course questions anchor inquiry and bring it back to focus on the most important questions the courses explores. I am not the only college teacher who struggles with the tension of horizontal and vertical learning — horizontal learning focuses on breadth of coverage and vertical learning focuses on depth of understanding, synthesis, analysis, and application.

**Vertical Learning Horizontal Learning**

In my experience, using foundational course questions can promote deeper vertical learning — where the sky is the limit and where students can go deep. Having clear, crisp, broad, enticing, and puzzling foundational course questions has allowed me to maintain focus when navigating my students through the muddy waters of learning and focus on depth of learning amid the need to cover content.

The following foundational course questions anchor inquiry in my graduate level cross-cultural education course — the focal point of this article:

- Who are you?
- Who are "cultural others"?
- How do social *systems* fetter or free groups and individuals?
- How can you transform the dynamics of power, oppression, and privilege — and in turn, transform society?

Course content and assignments walk students through an exploration of these questions. The learning objectives focus on self, other, and systems understandings of social realities in effort to move my students toward deeper culturally competent engagement. The purpose of these questions is to anchor inquiry in the course and to eventually substantiate that students have achieve deeper self, other, and systems understandings based on their learning in the course.

As part of the learning journey in the course, students complete a cultural profile assignment (learning objective: self understanding), a service-learning project (learning objective: other understanding), and write a scholarly essay answering the foundational course questions

(learning objective: self, other, systems understanding). Alignment of course assignments and learning objectives are quite clear and explicit. In answering the foundational course questions, students draft a scholarly essay at the beginning of the class and are clearly told that answering these questions will be the final exam for the course as well. In a sense, this serves as a pre and post test to measure their learning. As part of the final exam, students are asked to reflect on changes in their original answers to the foundational course questions for the final exam as well. By doing this, students and I can get a sense of how and what they have learned over the semester.

In terms of content for this cross-cultural education course, students engage with a wide variety of readings that focus on understanding culture, self, ethnography, as well as power, oppression, and privilege related to various social identities (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, language, geographic origin, etc…). As part of that content journey, students engage with readings on critical peace education, broadly defined by Bajaj and Brantmeier (2011) as "…a dynamic and relational understanding of the role of human agency in influencing structural forms of violence that limit the full realization of human rights by all people(s)" (p 221). Students in my course are urged to think deeply about foundational questions three and four that examine the systemic realities and dynamics of power, oppression, and privilege—and equally as important, they are asked to reflect on the constraints and possibilities of their own efforts to create a more culturally competent, just, and peaceful society.

When I introduced the theory and practice of critical peace education (Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2011) to my students in my masters level Cross-Cultural Education course at James Madison University in the spring of 2012, I observed an opening in one student — Kerri Lawrence; these flames of deep learning inspired me and renewed my sense of purpose and my need to connect my scholarship with teaching in more deliberate ways. In essence, Kerri's enthusiasm about critical peace education praxis (theory + practice) in the articles that I co-edited with Monisha Bajaj in a special edition on the topic for the *Journal of Peace Education*, re-kindled my sense of meaning and the integrated importance of teaching and scholarship. It was observing the lightning-life-of the mind and of the heart that renewed my sense of hope and wholeness.

As a student in my spring 2012 course, Kerri Lawrence chose to be the discussion co-leader on the topic of critical peace education. I asked my students to read the entire critical peace education special edition of the *Journal of Peace Education* that hosts several examples of critical peace education in the context of teacher education, public schools, indigenous education, and human rights education in the countries of Jordan, New Zealand, and the United States. Kerri was really jazzed from reading the articles. It was quite clear to me that she was jazzed by observing her enthusiasm when she developed an abstract of the readings and by her innovative lesson plan she enacted in our class; the topic had sparked the lightning life of the mind and heart in Kerri. Her zeal and enthusiasm was contagious for me. I realized how important it is for college professors' scholarship not only to get validated through a national or international peer review process that ends up in published work, but also how important it is for our students to validate the work that they do through careful examination and application of our intellectual labors. In short, I was transformed from a doubtful critical peace education scholar to a more hopeful teacher-scholar. Her words in her final paper lifted my spirits.

The following are Kerri's words in her final exam, written at the end of the course. Following that reflection, Kerri provides a reflective account of how she is currently incorporating critical peace education into her classroom as a first year teacher in Northern Virginia.

**Reflection on what Critical Peace Education Means to Me—Kerri Lawrence, May 2012**

When I first started diving into critical peace education, I was amazed at how revolutionary of a concept it was and how I had never heard of it. I had only really experienced peace education in small doses growing up and never really had it enough that it had a substantial impact on me. Conflict usually ended in one party or the other or both getting into trouble and having some kind of punishment. My teachers never taught learning to mediate and how to work things out peacefully and I feel like this would have been something greatly beneficial if it had. Because of this, the concept of critical peace education and even peace education was somewhat foreign. I really became passionate about it through my research because I have very strong beliefs of teaching true histories, giving voice to those who might not be heard, and having cultural empathy. However, these passions were not found overnight and I remember struggling at points in my past to accept these approaches and give up ones that I had been so used to.

It can be a scary thing to have to talk about your beliefs, especially if you are unsure if they are hurtful to someone else or another group. Being a white female in middle to upper middle class family gave me privileges that others might not have. I can now identify that I have been privileged based on these advantages, whether or not I acted on it. It is not an easy task to admit that you are part of the privileged because then it means that you are part of a group that is above another group in some way, even if you never act on it. I believe that a safe and accepting classroom is necessary for students to engage in meaningful conversation because it allows the possibility for them to open up. This is how I was able to combat my own privileges and to continue learning about how to fight oppression and violence.

After coming to this realization that privilege causes oppression even if you are not acting on it, I decided to unlearn more about what I had been taught up to this point. I have realized that history is littered with those who are privileged and those who are oppressed with violence throughout. From this discovery, I have consistently created lesson plans for my classroom internships, as well as ones to use for the future, in order to give a voice to those who might not be considered privileged enough to have one. This, to me, means that I bring in many different viewpoints, primary source documents, speeches, re-enactments, photographs, and videos that allow for that spark in conversation in the classroom. After having a safe environment, you need to give students that spark of passion, and meaningful conversation may be reached. I have seen it happen in my experience, so far, and it is truly invigorating to watch. Prompting students in a multitude of ways and giving them multiple perspectives may have them empathize or argue against in meaningful ways. This worthwhile conversation is one major aspect of critical peace education in the classroom.

Another aspect of my education of myself as the privileged was learning that there is violence that separates the privileged from the oppressed. This concept is also difficult to overcome. My first thought when I was introduced to this idea a few years ago was that of surprise and denial. If I am not actively causing violence, then how is who I am and what I look like causing

violence? Through discussion and different readings, I realized that there is the privileged and there is the oppressed and the privileged need to use this power to give voice to those oppressed and to combat the violence that creates this system. "Central to these projects, then, is a dynamic and relational understanding of the role of human agency in influencing structural forms of violence that limit the full realization of humans rights by all people(s)" (Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2011, p. 221). It was a necessary, yet difficult realization to come to when I realized that this violence actually limited human rights. I had never thought about it in that way and it was very powerful.

I have become conscious of the fact that it is necessary to have a safe and healthy environment for the students to feel comfortable in so that they can come to these conclusions. I was only able to truly understand privilege and power once I was in a comfortable classroom. Meaningful conversation is a key ingredient to making critical peace education work. Without meaningful experiences and conversation, the students will get nothing out of critical peace education and the effort would not be effective. I see now that I am a change agent and I am a change agent who is going to be in an ideal position to promote change. As an educator, I can relay what I have learned about critical peace education to the students in my classroom. I can promote peacekeeping, mediation, conflict resolution, multiple perspectives, and intercultural empathy into my curriculum. In turn, this can effectively combat the –isms that we are still struggling with as a society today. Through meaningful discourse, students will be able to discuss these topics openly and truly understand how they, too, are transformative change agents.

**Reflections from My First Teaching Position—Kerri Lawrence, November 2012**

I am currently in my first year teaching position in Fourth Grade at a diverse school in the suburbs of Northern Virginia. I teach all subjects throughout the day and include a meeting time to allow students to share their experiences. As a first year teacher, there are many things that we do to adapt and be flexible to the many changes we need learn. An important aspect of teaching is to create a safe and engaging learning atmosphere for the students. I want students to feel safe in knowing that they will not be hurt, mocked, ridiculed, etc. in my classroom and that they can always talk to me about any issues they are facing. Moreover, I want students to have access to an engaging learning environment where experiences are more meaningful and all are participating in their own learning. This is always a challenge, but when it is set up in this way it creates a very rewarding experience for both the students and the teacher.

I am constantly learning about and developing my classroom environment to sustain a safe and student-centered experience. A student-centered approach allows for students to take part in their own learning and for the teacher to act as a facilitator to that learning. To do this, I allow students to teach the class about new strategies, or follow their interests to give learning more meaning. Students are actively involved in their learning and it is much more meaningful than a teacher-centered approach where teaching happens all day long, but learning does not. The student-centered approach connects with having a critical approach to peace education by providing multiple perspectives to histories and engaging in cultural empathy. I have reflected on my experiences in a critical peace education course at James Madison University and I use what I have learned to implement critical peace education into my classroom.

I believe that critical peace education asks educators to take on the responsibility of practicing peace education in the classroom. Critical peace educators teach true histories, allow for multiple perspectives, and teach cultural empathy. This lends itself to creating generations of students who are aware of privileges and combat the violence that coincides with these privileges. Critical peace educators are asked to be the change agents in society and teach peace education to our students. I am currently practicing a "Responsive Classroom" approach that helps to build a classroom community where students feel more comfortable talking openly with other students in the class. Responsive classroom is a "research-backed approach to elementary education that increases academic achievement, decreases problem behaviors, improves social skills, and leads to more high quality instruction" (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2012). I have a morning meeting every day that includes a message from the teacher, greetings with each other, student sharing, and activities. Creating a classroom community helps toward having an atmosphere conducive to critical peace education. Students are able to share openly how they may be feeling about anything even if it involves another student. I do this in my classroom by allowing students to share experiences with each other, "bragging" about each other, and doing activities that build confidence in themselves and each other. Building a community in the classroom helps to create a safe atmosphere where students are not scared to share thoughts, beliefs, or opinions.

By allowing students to share experiences with each other, I create openness toward diversity. For example, when learning about different Native American tribes in the area, students from Central and South America noticed the use of cornhusks and became excited to share about how their culture uses cornhusks. Instead of ignoring their excitement to share, I saved time at the end of the class to let them discuss and share with the class about the experiences they had and how their culture uses cornhusks. Seizing this opportunity allowed for the class to value the multiple voices in my classroom. This allowed me to give a critical approach to peace education and expand cultural empathy for each student. I have also always believed that students can be the best educators and provide many opportunities for meaningful conversation, especially when talking about their own culture, and I utilize this by allowing for many opportunities to share their knowledge.

Early in the year I explained to all of my students that conflict is natural and we had a discussion about how it is inevitable and healthy within our lives. As a critical peace educator, I practice, with students, different strategies on how to solve conflict in their lives. This includes discussions on how to effectively talk to the other student so they understand what you are feeling, how to be a peer mediator for students, and how to be an active listener in these conversations. Students saw how we all experience it in many different forms and with all different types of people. When students recognize they have conflict with other students, for example when they become upset at something another student says to them, I allow for them to talk it out with each other. As a result, I have seen that this allows students to talk out what is bothering them and in turn, less time is spent worrying or angry at another student and more time is spent learning in the classroom. I mediate for a short time, modeling the language that I want them to use when they are talking with each other about the conflict, and then I allow them to work it out with each other. By doing this, I am able to provide students with the tools to have meaningful conversation with each other to transform the dynamics of power, oppression, and

privilege. This knowledge and tools will help students to become their own change agents and work to transform society.

After seeing the positive results in my classroom so far, I plan to continue implementing peace education throughout every day. I believe that I have a responsibility as an educator to place a critical lens on our teaching to provide opportunities for students to learn multiple perspectives, practice cultural empathy, and learn true histories. These opportunities, along with discussion and reflection, will help students to combat the violence within our society and work towards a more peaceful world. Building the frameworks within my classroom to call students to question the histories they've been given, to seek information from primary resources, and to ask questions of other students and people who can provide authentic histories and multiple perspectives will help build toward a community that fights the underlying violence within our society today.

**Towards Closure–Being the Change**

The words of Mahatma Gandhi, "We must be the change we wish to see for the world" have been inscribed on my (Ed Brantmeier's) syllabi for many years now. Kerri made a strong statement in her final exam paper last spring that resonates with Gandhi's words. She wrote, "I see now that I am a change agent and I am a change agent who is going to be in an ideal position [as a teacher] to promote change." By reflecting on Kerri's reflections, I think we have a lot to learn about what she wishes and practices with her own students.

Kerri sees the promise of the multiplier effect, of how her classroom and the deep learning she encourages, can impact others and have ripple effects in schools, communities, and societies. Through a self-aware approach in the classroom, she attempts to open spaces for others to talk and to share their stories, rather than dominating the conversations and curriculum according to the power and privilege here social positionality might afford her. She strives to build community through creating a safe environment for dialogue and through promoting co-learning. Kerri's reflections indicate that she struggles in her own learning and that she is open to sharing that struggle with others; she practices a pedagogy of vulnerability by being open about her learning struggles. Kerri believes that promoting critical, multi-perspectival thinking is important in education for peace. Engaging in cultural empathy, teaching true histories, and providing counter-narrative are core to her critical peace education approach.

Counter-narratives challenge "official knowledge" and dominant discourse and provide voice to historically marginalized groups and individuals. Giving voice is a powerful act that holds transformative potential. In the context of critical race theory and methodology, counterstorying is "a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter stories can shatter complacency; challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p.32). Kerri's counterstorytelling approach, though not specifically targeting race in her reflections, attempts to disrupt and challenge the legitimizing myths that sustain the privilege of the power elite. In ideal form, her practice would alleviate some of the cultural violence inherent in socio-cultural, political, and economic systems that privilege some at the exclusion of others.

Kerri's journey, and the empowerment and wisdom she is gaining along the way, is her own—I only claim to be a small part of that journey by asking alluring, beautiful, foundational questions in my courses. I try to live the change I wish to see in higher education and in K-12 education—a change orientation rooted in deep, relevant, meaningful, and sticky learning toward promoting vibrant, democratic, and peaceful schools, communities, societies and world. Working with Kerri has renewed my sense of hope and meaning. That is why we share our story of teaching and learning struggles with you the reader. We aim to create a little more peace and justice in an oft violent world.

*Critical peace educators teach true histories, allow for multiple perspectives, and teach cultural empathy. This lends itself to creating generations of students who are aware of privileges and combat the violence that coincides with these privileges.*

**Kerri Lawrence, November 2012**

**Note:**

1. More broadly, adaptive intelligence is crucial for cultural survival, renewal, and innovation for historically marginalized groups of people in the context of cultural and technological globalization (Brantmeier, 2008).

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