

Mapping Unknowns—Bard College

Looking Into Classrooms

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Grade: College

Subject: Education (intended
for pre-service secondary
school teachers)

Time Required: one
three-hour session

Overview

This workshop is part of a five-day sequence at Bard College called “Issues in Teaching and Learning.” The sequence serves as an interdisciplinary introduction to the Master of Arts in Teaching Program at Bard College. “Looking Into Classrooms” asks pre-service teachers to begin thinking about the classroom environment and how it affects learning. The workshop includes a brief introduction to searching for images in the LOC digital archives to find historic photos of classrooms. Students then engage in a simple noticing exercise—“Look at the...” and “Where is the...”—to describe a small set of classroom photos from different moments in the 20th century. They then write to put their descriptions in conversation with the essay, “The Virtues of Not Knowing,” from Eleanor Duckworth’s *The Having Of Wonderful Ideas and Other Essays On Teaching and Learning* (Teachers College Press, 2006).

LOC Sites Consulted

Fourth Grade Social Studies, Bronx 2013

Image imbedded in <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2013/09/back-to-school/>

History Class, Woonsocket High School, Woonsocket, RI 1979

Rhode Island Folk Life Project Collection,
https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.afc/afc1991022.afc1991022_01123

Children Learning To Draw, Commune School, China 1979

Prints and Photographs Division, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppss.00524/>

Central High School Classroom, Charlotte Court House, Virginia 1943

Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information photograph collection,
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017858489/>

Objectives

Students will:

- learn a simple means of searching for photos in the LOC digital archives
- analyze photographs using a “noticing” protocol developed at the Institute for Writing and Thinking
- generate questions and claims about the “philosophy of learning” implicit in the photographs
- connect their questions and claims to specific passages from Eleanor Duckworth

Threaded through all of these objectives is a specific pedagogical objective:

- encounter and reflect on a set of interdisciplinary writing-to-learn practices

Procedure

Introducing the Activity

Say that we'll be looking at images of classrooms, imagining our own, and deciding what all this suggests about our philosophies of learning.

Introduce and model a simple protocol called “Noticing and Wondering”:

- First, we begin with what's there. Students can simply say, “Look at the...” or “I notice the...”
- Then, we switch to what's absent. Students can say, “Where is the...?”

Say that the point is to forestall interpretation and simply notice what's there and what's missing, from your point of view.

Noticing and Wondering

Using the protocol, look at images in the following order. Supplemental questions are intended to come after substantial time has been given to “noticing and wondering.”

1. Fourth Grade Social Studies, Bronx 2013
Turn & Talk: What does the “look” of the classroom tell us about a philosophy of learning? What might be some rules or guidelines that teachers and students follow in this classroom?
Share.

Repeat with at least two others (notice, then discuss), for instance:

2. History Class, Woonsocket High School, Rhode Island 1979
Ask: How are the guidelines different in this classroom? What is the philosophy of learning here?
3. Children Learning To Draw, Commune School, China 1979
Ask: What is new in this image?

Reflecting on the Activity

At this stage, pause to reflect on the method, either in writing or aloud.

Pause also to note that all of these images were found in the Library of Congress digital archives, a vast repository of primary sources.

Demonstrate a search in Google using `site:loc.gov` either with “classroom” or “learning” as the search term.

Give participants a brief opportunity to engage in their own searches using their devices (phones or laptops) and sharing with neighbors.

Transition to Article

Ask participants to take out the article by Eleanor Duckworth, “The Virtues of Not Knowing.” Say that we will write to a series of prompts, interrupted periodically by brief discussion.

Focused Free Write: Bracket a passage that helps you imagine what Duckworth’s classroom might look like. Write to reflect on the passage and your image of her classroom.

Share (hear at least six participants; they should read from their writing)

Focused Free Write 2: Based on what you’ve heard, what might the “rules” or classroom guidelines be for students and teachers in a Duckworth class?

Share with a neighbor.

FFW 3: Describe your ideal classroom. You are the teacher, and the subject is your major in the MAT. Feel free to draw and label if that works better for you than a written description. Please note the word “ideal”: in this imaginative exercise, you are a teacher, and you have complete control over setting up the learning environment for your students. Money is no object. Use your imagination. Where is the room? How is it set up? What’s on the walls (if there are walls...)? You could be in a school building, either conventional or unconventional. You could be online, in a field, in a boat.

Shift to Groupwork

In your group (no more than four students per group), do the following:

1. Share your ideal classrooms
2. Based on your ideals, create a list that describes what you, as a group, can agree on as a set of classroom rules or guidelines for teachers and students that will facilitate learning. Aim to make these statements, such as “Everyone can speak their mind freely.” You are limited to 5 sentences.
3. Write these guidelines on large poster paper.

Gallery Walk

After returning from breakout groups and hanging their posters, students visit each other’s posters. They leave questions or comments on the posters using sticky notes. Each group then returns to its own poster, reads the sticky notes, and holds a brief huddle about them.

Return to whole group

Process Write: Based on the posters, what do our imagined classrooms have in common—practically and philosophically? Were there surprises?

Share.