From Aesthetics to Awakeness
A Greenean Approach to Multicultural Narratives in the Classroom

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Abstract

This paper explores philosopher of education Maxine Greene's position on narratives in multicultural education. Moreover, this paper will look into notions of aesthetic education, social imagination, and "wide-awakeness": three Greenean concepts that will be examined vis-à-vis multicultural narratives in educational contexts. This triad aims to help both the learner and the educator to emancipate multicultural narratives from the periphery, and to nurture an inclusive philosophy of education in class.

Introduction

All students ought to experience equity in their educational journey in schools. As inclusive as it sounds, the struggle with maintaining equity through multiculturalism in educational contexts has always been contested. As Banks states, there are characteristics within school institutions that "systematically deny some groups of students equal educational opportunities" (2013, 3). Further, Maxine Greene highlights that multicultural narratives, being pluralistic, are often marginalised, at times due to their assumed 'provocation'. Such representation reminds us of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's plea to oppose the *Single Story*:[1] to release stories from socio-political bigotries, and ultimately, to be able to imagine the other.

Greene wrote extensively on the power of aesthetic education for social transformation, calling educators and learners to nurture a sense of social imagination, which in turn leads to what Greene calls a "wide-awakeness". These three concepts, from Greene's perspective, give hope for us educators (and learners) to strive towards pluralism in narratives, giving justice to every story. Also, and with reference to Arendt, Greene speaks on "the passions of pluralism" in class, "plurality" being the condition of human action: "Even though we are on a common ground, we have different locations on that ground, and each one sees or hears from a different position" (Arendt 1958, 57).

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[1] See the full speech given by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, titled "The danger of a single story": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg.

For this paper, the main focus on multicultural narratives will be placed in classroom settings, i.e., exploring the dynamics between the educator and the learner. Moreover, factors such as education systems, curricula, teacher training, and socio-political dynamics may also increase or decrease the probability of having multicultural narratives present in the class.

Aesthetic education

For Greene, the term "aesthetics" refers to a specific branch of philosophy that focuses on the interaction of perception, sensation, and imagination concerning our knowledge, understanding, and emotional connection with the world. Additionally, Greene argues that the term "aesthetic" serves as an adjective used to characterise or highlight experiential being that emerges through encounters with works of art. Such encounters are educational, "enabling persons to become different, to enter the multiple provinces of meaning that create perspectives on the works" (Greene 2001, 5).

Greene perceives aesthetic education not merely as the transmission of facts, but as a means to foster empathy and awareness through the arts. Additionally, if the educator includes multicultural narratives through different artistic pedagogies, such as literature, visual arts, music, and theatre, it can be a way of politicising the classroom to be open and exposed towards the other. Together with their students, educators can decipher political messages in lyrics or literature, analyse the storylines of performances and filmography, or immerse themselves in visual art or satire, creating spaces for understanding and critique.

By engaging with diverse forms of artistic expression, students can develop a more profound appreciation for the richness of cultural diversity and, in turn, contribute to a more inclusive and empathetic society. For instance, the street artist Banksy[2] along with other artistic visuals can be a good example of using socio-political art to release multicultural narratives in class. As an Ethics Education teacher of 14- to 16-year-old students, I have personally introduced such artwork in the classroom. Since the class is both multicultural and multinational, it was quite interesting to see the dynamics in analysis between students. For instance, there was a particular artwork portraying a man throwing a bouquet, presumably to a crowd or a building. In interpretation, the same artwork is usually interpreted as 'violent', since the same stance that the man is depicted throwing the flowers is typically associated with a "terrorist throwing a hand grenade", as one of the students remarked. Afterwards, the students managed to pinpoint the hidden intentions that the artist conveyed in his work.

As the different artworks were presented in class, the students were free to express their interpretations and interact with each other's reflections. It was intriguing to witness the differences in interpretation between students coming from Eastern Europe and the Middle East, and students coming from Western European backgrounds. Moreover, students coming from geographically Eastern countries were more likely to engage in artworks portraying war or violence, whilst students coming from Western European countries stayed more attentive to what the other students were commenting on. Further, while some students tittered about the

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[2] See Banksy's official portfolio website here: https://banksy.co.uk.

artwork depicting warfare, others showed discomfort. While some students looked at the centre of the picture, others gazed at its periphery. In any case, the use of Banksy's artworks provoked a lot of expressions and lengthy conversations in the class. Students were also sharing experiences and asking questions to each other. This is in parallel with Greene's view of using such pedagogical means, allowing students to view each other as *who* and not *what* they are (1995, 155).

For Greene, aesthetic education can face the persisting challenges of multicultural narratives when "representing 'lesser' cultures and ways of life" (Greene 1993, 215). Moreover, Greene criticises "political correctness", arguing that it is invoked by "those who want things to stay as they have been" (ibid.), referring to the misrepresentation of multiculturalism in the curriculum – which consequently affects the class.

Social imagination

Spector et al. (2017, 1) note that Greene's concept of aesthetic education is to cultivate what she proposes as social imagination, being: "Artistic ways of knowing to allow for people to see beyond their worlds and beyond 'what is' into our worlds of 'what was' and 'what might' be someday." Inspired by the poet Emily Dickinson, for Greene, social imagination is the capacity to see beyond what is immediately present and to imagine alternative ways of being and thinking. Greene argues that it is through imagination that societies can transcend the limitations of their own experiences, engage with the perspectives of others, and "find its soul" (Miller 1998, 78). Greene states that social imagination is paramount in the context of multicultural education, helping students and educators to challenge dominant narratives and stereotypes, and envision alternative ways of doing politics.

When imagining the other, teachers (and learners) ought to take a "stranger's point of view", as Greene holds: "To take a stranger's point of view on everyday reality is to look inquiringly and wonderingly on the world in which one lives; it is like returning home from a long stay in some other place" (1973, 267). Adopting the "stranger" lens will make it difficult to view the world again as it was, as "the stranger is one who has become wilfully estranged" (Block 2005, 18).

Greene's pedagogical vision of social imagination is not essentially to initiate progress or resolve concerns; it is to "awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected" (Greene 1995, 28). As Fenech & Colombo argued, social imagination is a "very powerful pedagogical tool for the educator, supposing that individuals in the community of inquiry may include the 'unseen, unheard, and unexpected' that Greene is speaking on" (2023, 109).

To conclude with Greene's plea for social imagination within multicultural narratives, I propose that *ethics of curiosity and imagination* ought to be further explored in the philosophy of education, in tandem with issues of privacy, power, sensitivity, and artificial intelligence, for instance. As highlighted, adopting the "stranger's point of view" by imagining the other involves Greene's notion of critical consciousness or "wide-awakeness", as will be discussed in the next part of the paper. The use of art and aesthetic education (such as portraying Banksy's artworks) helped to bridge these stages, having students being invited to be curious about the

experiences of the other. In other words, the pedagogy chosen by the educator (in this case the use of artworks) is going to affect the point of view of the students in adopting empathy and "conscience" towards others. Due to their social justice and democratic approach, other pedagogical means (which are not discussed in this paper) such as a pedagogy of "discomfort" (Boler, 1999) and an "engaged pedagogy" (hooks, 1994) can also help bridge Greene's concepts of social imagination and wide-awakeness.

"Wide-awakeness"

Greene's idea of wide-awakeness isn't merely about awareness; it embodies a profound state of critical consciousness, a call to engage with the world. It encourages individuals to transcend passive observation and actively engage with the realities surrounding them. To foster a sense of "wide-awakeness", educators are tasked with creating learning environments that not only acknowledge but actively celebrate diversity. They must instil in students the desire to seek understanding, embrace empathy, and respect differing perspectives. It calls for a shift from mere tolerance of diversity to a deep appreciation and active engagement with it. It urges individuals to move beyond mere recognition of differences towards a genuine understanding and celebration of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs.

Within multicultural narratives in education, "wide-awakeness" prompts educators to design curricula and pedagogical approaches that incorporate diverse perspectives. It encourages them to infuse literature, arts, history, and other subjects with narratives that represent a wide array of cultures and experiences. For instance, when depicting families, educators can include various family dynamics apart from the 'typical' heterosexual ones, or make sure that the variety of students' religions and countries are part of the class's discourse. However, "wide-awakeness" cannot be expected to happen just by including narratives of same-sex parents for instance; the class needs to actively engage with the politics and ethics of why such stories were depicted otherwise in the first place – if we strive not to repeat the same mistakes. Further, in European education systems, challenging a Eurocentric curriculum can be a step forward in combating stereotypes and assumptions, linguistic barriers, and neoliberal ideologies (Apple et al. 2009).

"Wide-awakeness" also brings forth the recognition of communities, realising that everyone is in a state of sameness: "where we are all the same because we are all different … as beings of the same, we are beings of otherness" (Baldacchino 2009, 12). This highlights the educator's role to both acknowledge the other in class and actively engage with them. Lastly, in Greene's view, there is a connection between morality and "wide-awakeness", i.e., morality can start to be nurtured through the 'awakening process' (Greene 1978), which can be used to be conscious about multicultural narratives in class.

Conclusion

At the heart of Greene's approach was the idea that education should be a transformative experience that enables individuals to develop a passion for pluralism and social change.

However, it is worth noting that in spite of plurality and diversity in education, albeit they are encouraged (as was the case in this paper), the student ought also to acknowledge their identity and human dignity – which is inherent in every being. By recognising one's identity, issues of pluralism and diversity can be better intertwined in educational contexts. For instance, to navigate tensions which might arise from pluralism vis-à-vis students' religious beliefs and backgrounds, educators can opt for inclusive examples when teaching (such as acknowledging various kinds of family dynamics apart from the predominant 'heterosexual' that exist in society). Also, the curriculum needs to be up to date with the classroom's demographic dynamics, asserting that it caters for a variety of perspectives and cultures in its philosophy and application. For the latter to be effective, sufficient teacher education needs also to be a requisite, ensuring that educators themselves are prepared to be pluralistic in their teaching – despite religious, cultural, or political differences.

Ultimately, from the use of the arts and aesthetics in pedagogy, invoking a sense of social imagination in the learning process, and the urgency of wide-awakeness through active learning, the restraints placed on multicultural narratives in the class are at a better chance of being exposed, discussed, and ultimately, liberated.

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