

POETIC REFLECTIONS: NOTES FROM “I AM FROM...”

Esther Chi Kim

University of Southern California, Rossier School of Education

Abstract:

This essay is a reflection of implementing Mike Klein’s (2019) “I am from...” activity as an exercise to encourage students to name their own identities and feel empowered through reflections of their positionalities and experiences.

When I was a Penn GSE student now more than 15 years ago, I sat in classrooms both large and small, hardly speaking up in class. I was just one year out of my undergraduate studies, hence young and doubting still my contributions to course text discussions with my peers. I sat mostly silent, wanting to speak but holding back. In classes, we were reading the heavy hitters such as Paulo Freire, Herbert Kohl, Paul Willis, and Signithia Fordham, among others. One day, I remember looking around the classroom and wondering what conversations would be like with each classmate surrounding the topics we were reading. Then it dawned on me that I didn’t actually know most of my peers. Sure, I knew their names and shared brief pleasantries passing through the halls and across campus, but I didn’t know where they were from, what brought them to graduate school, and what they did outside of classes; let alone, what they thought about our week’s readings. And this was a shame, I thought, because what I was learning through readings was changing, shifting, and shaping my core; I wanted to talk about them, but feared to think out loud.

Paulo Freire’s (1970/1996) truth that “dialogue cannot exist ... in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people” (p. 70) became a reality for me, a convoluted realization that dialogue blossoms when we love others and the world we share together. The education I received from Penn GSE to bravely march forward could best be summed up as if to hide in Freire’s footnote on the same page describing his interpretation of love. It asks simply, “What, indeed, is the deeper motive which moves individuals to become revolutionaries, but the dehumanization of people?” (p. 70).

This experience may perhaps be the reason that today, I purposefully create a space for my graduate students to share their backgrounds and positionalities in class early on, at the start of the semester. In whatever way or extent to which they feel comfortable sharing, I ask that each student reflect and share, and not just with me but with one another. To achieve this, I need to be the first to be a revolutionary, open and vulnerable, yet brave and taking up space.

In my Foundations of Urban Education class at USC Rossier School of Education, I incorporated an activity called “I am from...” as described by Mike Klein (2019). He explains that “‘I am from’ is a tool for analyzing the social construction of intersectional identity that addresses racism and other inequities in the classroom” (p. 87). The tool was a result of a conversation with his student who had shared with him her identities that complicated what society typically thinks of people placed within boxed categories. As a way to encourage my students to think through their lived experiences and empower them by claiming and defining their own identities, I planned for the activity during week 2 of the 15-week semester.

Week 1 set the tone of the course, including a set of rules that we collectively created to abide by moving forward with the rest of the semester. The result of an in-depth discussion of the class and classroom expectations were as follows:

- Understand that we get passionate; don’t misunderstand passion with anger or heat.
- Take risks; speak your truth.
- Own the impact on other people; accept that what you said could be hurtful.
- Be respectful for others’ readiness to engage *and* boundaries.
- Keep conversations open ended; provide time/space to think/reflect.
- Be aware that people process at different paces.

Subsequently, instead of the typical around-the-classroom introductions, I had students pair up and interview one another and then prepare a bio of their partner to present to the whole group. Since this class is the first course of their first semester in the Education Leadership program, the mini-interviews in pairs proved to be special—it was exciting, engaging, and informative.

In the second week of class, we began the session with Klein's "I am from..." activity. I started by sharing my reflection:

I am from South Korea, but left when I was too young to remember.
I am from a lower socioeconomic background.
I am from an undocumented status for most of my childhood.
I am from a physically-abled body, but starting to feel the painful effects of arthritis in my bones.
I am from a conservative Korean Christian background, which constantly made me feel shame and guilt, even today.
I am from fancy school names that always made me feel out of place.
I am from a partnered status that both makes me feel secure and insecure.
I am from a dog-loving community that feels the unconditional love of pets is one of the most important feelings people should feel as often as possible.

Students subsequently jotted their identities privately, noting which ones they felt comfortable sharing with the whole class. The following were some of the responses:

I am from warm waters and indigenous people.
I am from anyone who dares to dream and pursue.
I am from the disabled community.
I am from considering myself a descendant of Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X.
I am from South Los Angeles.
I am from a Central American family that taught me pride in who I am and that education is the only thing that no one can take away.
I am from anger due to being told that I couldn't because of gender, race, or neighborhood and responding to that anger by proving to everyone that I can.
I am part of a nuclear family that provides me happiness support and fulfillment.
I am from Filipino American first-generation immigrants who celebrated the last resident alien status of my green card and embrace the naturalization process.
I am from a single parent household and have one of my own.
I am from a loving mother and a caring educator.
I am from the gay males of Stonewall pride and unrest.
I am from the Great Wall of China, the Cathedral of San Miguel de Allende, and the bluest Fiji Islands.
I am from English, Spanish, and Mandarin.
I am from hip hop RnB feelings and expression, and from social justice community empowerment and the power of language.
I am from the coupon clipping middle class.
I am from a Christian evangelistic household where religion came before anything.
I am from a young adult realization that we are still fighting for civil rights in this country and getting hot with anger and emotion for my friends who have experienced racism, homophobia, and the pains of not having enough.
I am from smart and intelligent Black women who are trailblazers in their own right.
I am number six of 10 siblings from two parents.
I am from going from teachers pronouncing my name correctly to teachers who mispronounce it so much that I became immune to it.
I am from a bit of rebellion who believes in speaking the truth.
I am from making people laugh, despite fearing what others think of me, and wondering if it's ever really good enough.
I am from a believer and a higher power that has no face and no name, but just is.
I am from a family of immigrants that did their best and still try their best.
I am from a heritage of strong Black women who always made it happen. Whatever it was, whatever it cost.
I am from a lineage of statistics—sexual assault victims, high school dropouts, and substance abusers.
I am from the coastal waters—refreshing and cool, yet powerful and destructive.
I am from my broken image of womanhood seeking to find my place as a representative of my ancestors while creating a legacy of my own.
I am from the generation of pull yourself up by your bootstraps, so that the next person can grab a hold of your heels.

The consequence of the exercise was nothing short of poetic reflections, and much more than I, or anyone else in the class, had anticipated. Students shared identities and experiences of sadness and pain, but also hope and triumph. Throughout the rest of the semester, dialogue felt genuine and honest, with students often recalling some of their peers' responses to the "I am from..." activity during future discussions.

To be sure, part of the reason the exercise felt so powerful for our class was because I have the fortune of working with students who self-selected themselves to pursue further education and learn the raw and untethered truths of urban education. These K–12 education-focused students came to the program and the class acknowledging that there is something that needed to be done to improve and/or enhance the state of urban education. Sharing our reflections of where we are from allowed us to

address our positionalities not only as educators, but as individuals who are from somewhere. And this, perhaps, might have been the most powerful lesson of the day: that we are *from somewhere* and each of us *belong* to a community. The exercise was a reminder that for many of us teaching in or considering urban classrooms, we must contemplate where our young students are coming from and where they belong. Acknowledging that someone belongs to a community is one strategy of illustrating profound love. It recognizes humanness, especially in a diverse urban education setting.

As I continue to think about Freire's (1970/1996) footnote that challenges us all to be revolutionaries—because the dehumanization of people still exists in much of the same but also nuanced ways—I think how a revolution needs to happen, it must happen; and it starts with me. It starts with me knowing who I am, and where and to whom I belong, because a thoughtful reflection on my own history allows me to appreciate others' stories and who they are and where they belong. Profound love for the world and for people can happen, it takes work and mutual appreciation of histories.

Esther Chi Kim currently resides in Los Angeles, California. Her work uses ethnographic methods to share counternarratives.

References:

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