

Bridges, Mirrors, Autonomy, and Counternarratives in the English Classroom

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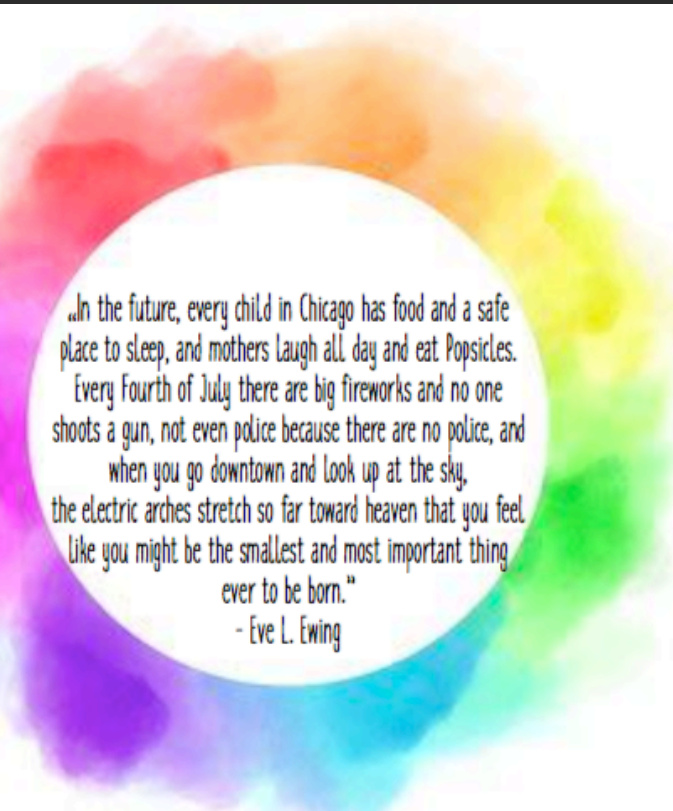
Context

- 12th grade elective English course: Literature as Art (LAA)
- At TechBoston Academy, 6-12 pilot school
- Predominantly low-income students of color
- Literature as Art:
 - Available to any 12th grade student
 - Primarily comprised of students interested in making art
 - Year-long



The entrance of TechBoston Academy

Framing: Intentions of LAA



„In the future, every child in Chicago has food and a safe place to sleep, and mothers laugh all day and eat Popsicles. Every Fourth of July there are big fireworks and no one shoots a gun, not even police because there are no police, and when you go downtown and look up at the sky, the electric arches stretch so far toward heaven that you feel like you might be the smallest and most important thing ever to be born.”
- Eve L. Ewing

- To treat students as serious artists
- To respect and care for the souls of students (bell hooks)
- To foster a space where students move through their own creative blocks into “exhilarating discovery of self” (Susan Kolodny)

Creative Blocks for Students in LAA

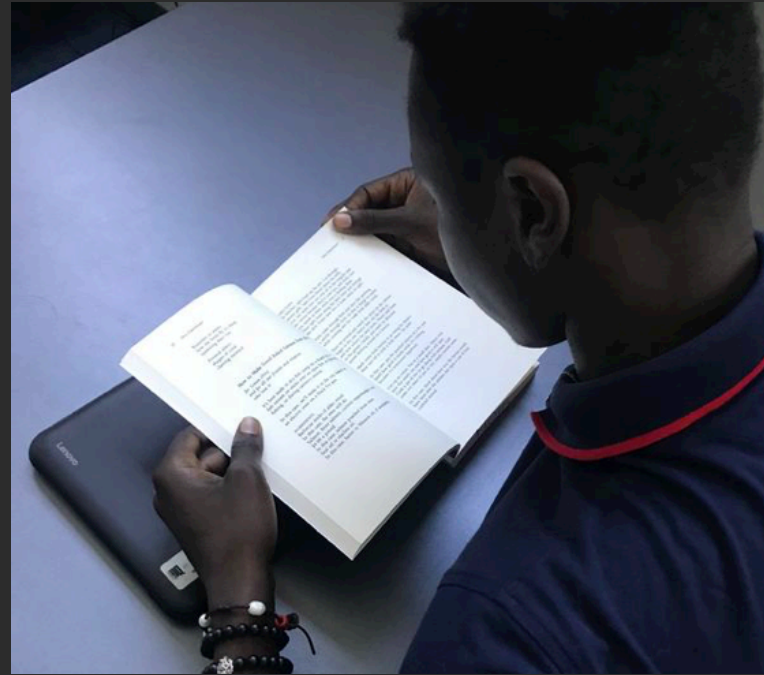
- The gap between what they see themselves make & what they perceive as “good” art
- Developing a sense of self worth and autonomy despite constant societal messages about who is valuable, visible, and worthy



James Baldwin

Bridges & Mirrors

- Students need a variety of relevant, high-quality, engaging art material that they experience positively
- Students need to see themselves in “mirrors” (Lucille Clifton)
- Activities designed to do this include:
 - Opportunities to read, analyze, and respond to a poem of one’s choice out of a large group of poems
 - Visiting museums or art exhibitions
 - Reading and viewing a variety of narratives
 - Developing an ability to use critical lenses to read and respond to art works



A student reading a new book of poetry

Autonomy & Counternarratives

Well let me write about my heels in the dirt
My feet stuck can't figure out if this is quick sand or dirt
How can i defend myself when I'm stuck in the dirt

Well let me write about the blood on my knees
From the city you kneel or fall to your knees
Got to say yes sir or master while being on your knees

Let me write about my hands being behind my back
My hands are a weapon so i got to keep my hands up and not behind my back
Any moment I'm shot and laying on my back

Well let me write with no voice
Yeah you see my mouth move but dont hear my voice
How can you identify my words when you didn't hear my voice

Well let me write with my feet
Didn't hear my voice so maybe you can understand if I write with my feet
Or should I let you lift me up till I can't feel the ground with my feet

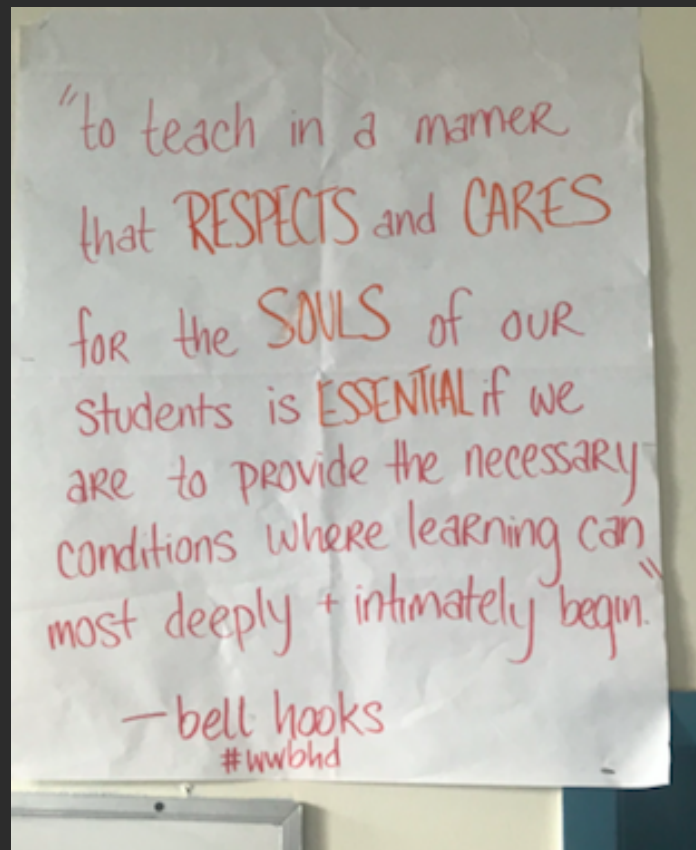
Well let me write

A poem by one student in last year's class

- Fear of failure is one of the greatest causes of negative behavior in the classroom (Saphier, Haley-Speca, and Gower)
- Students need opportunities to feel that their work is valuable and that they can act against oppressive narratives and/or systems
- Activities designed to do this include:
 - Poetry readings in class and with other audiences
 - Creative workshops that are student led
 - Opportunities to respond to dominant narratives in different creative modes

Conclusions

- Students need mirrors as they build bridges towards feeling autonomy over their creative process
- Responding to oppressive systems shifts the location of knowledge into students' lived experiences, redefining the classroom
- Taking students seriously as artists helps foster their own sense of self-worth and capacity



A poster in our classroom

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