

Jennifer Fitzgerald  
TLC I  
6/25/07  
Cultural Autobiography

Who am I? Why am I the way I am? What type of person do I want to become?

Beth Wassell 6/27/07 9:35  
AM  
These are...

Questions all of us will address at one time or another in our lives, many times on a therapist's couch. White. Italian. German. Christian. Shader, (my hometown is called Maple Shade). Lower Middle Class. Female. Do these words define me?

This project takes these questions and puts an interesting perspective on them: How will my past experiences and background influence who I am as a teacher? By looking inward and putting into practice the reflection needed to become a more evolved person, I hope I can acknowledge any biases, prejudgments, or generalizations and begin the work to overcoming them. A truly honest multicultural classroom cannot occur until a teacher can do this.

Beth Wassell 6/27/07 9:35  
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Yes!

One important influence in my life was the decision of my parents to put me into Little League baseball instead of softball at the age of 6. This might seem rather common now, but in the early eighties when I was younger there were only a handful of girls playing baseball. I continued playing baseball even as the other girls eventually moved over to softball. The highlight of my baseball career came when I joined the Babe Ruth league at the age of thirteen. I was the first girl to ever play at this level in my hometown. I played until this level ended, at age fifteen. In my small town it was somewhat of a big deal that I finished out the Babe Ruth league. The Ladies Auxiliary made a speech and gave me a plaque at the end of the year banquet. I also won the Sportsmanship Award for the league.

Beth Wassell  
Jun 27, '07, 9:43 AM  
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When I was younger, it was no big deal to play baseball. I got along well with my teammates and my coaches all seemed to like me. I played hard and my father made sure I could catch a ball and not throw “like a girl”. He and I would practice many evenings after dinner in the street in front of our house. He would throw me ball after ball until there was no doubt that I would catch it. I didn’t like it very much when we would help coach our teams. He was very critical and very competitive. He put me at first base because I was the only one he could trust to catch the ball. When I would make an error, though, he was there to let me know it. One time sticks out in my memory because I made two errors in one game. He yelled at me the whole way home and I remember getting home and going right into my room, crying. I was about 7 or 8 years old. Once my parents divorced, he slowly stopped coming around. He would call once and awhile, but all he would ask about was baseball. If my team lost, he would criticize everything.

Playing baseball became much harder the older I got, and not just on the field. When I was getting ready to join the Babe Ruth league, I was thirteen and in seventh grade. I just wanted to fit in, but playing in this league was a goal of mine. Many of the coaches were not happy I was joining and they made that known. I was the next to last pick in the draft, ahead of only one boy who was extremely overweight. During the games, there was constant sexual harassment by the other boys and even some coaches. I didn’t play much my first year, but by my third year I had cracked the starting line-up. They had moved me to the outfield, since there was no way a girl would play first. This was fine, as long as I got to play. School was also hard because some girls would

comment that I shouldn't be playing baseball anymore. I was not very girly and this was the cause of more teasing. This time was difficult but today a source of pride.

I have some good lessons and some negative lessons from my baseball days. I am so proud that I accomplished my goal and did something no other female had done up to that point. I overcame the harassment, the criticism, and the low to no expectations to achieve this goal. I guess I questioned the dominant culture in my town sports, (that it's for the boys), and took a step towards social equality in my small town. Today I still believe that women can do anything men can do if given the chance. I do find myself questioning sometimes how the woman doctor, lawyer or scientist is perceived in her circle. Is she working harder to overcome the men's ideas around her that she shouldn't be there? I find myself rooting for girls to do well and hoping they succeed just as well if not more than the boys around them. I have to keep in mind that this is not equality either. I do have an expectation now of the men around me looking down on me and thinking I am not good enough. This is an issue I have been trying to overcome because it influences everything I do, from personal relationships to work relationships.

A second big influence in my life was the usually subtle, sometimes obvious prejudice in my family and school. Where I grew up there were not too many other ethnicities or races around besides white. I didn't notice really until about junior high. I do remember my father making comments when I was younger, using racial slurs while watching television or in the car. My grandparents would do the same thing; quietly use these types of words, but I never really knew what they meant. I was able to figure out what type of person received which slur, though. The blatant prejudice happened when I

Beth Wassell 6/27/07 9:46  
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Were or were not?

was in seventh grade. I was still playing baseball and there were one or two black boys playing also. One boy, Lamar, and I became friends. Apparently he wanted to be more than friends. One day he came to my house when I wasn't home. When I came home my mom told me he had stopped by and brought me flowers. She went on to lecture me about the reputation I was going to get if I continued hanging around the black boy. Ironically, I had never received flowers from a boy before, so the fact that he was a nice person meant nothing to my mom. It was here that I really started to question why my mom, and the rest of my family, would feel this way. As I continued through high school, my girlfriend and I began to hang out with a group of older black boys. They were the only group in their grade and they were the star athletes. My friend dated a couple of them, while I kissed one. We would all hang out as friends. We never saw a problem, until other students started calling us n...-lovers. This was quite upsetting, but it didn't stop us. We came to realize how prejudiced our school and town were.

Another incident occurred when I gave my best friend's phone number to a boy who was black. We were juniors in high school. He was friends with my boyfriend and I thought they would like each other. When he called her house her father answered the phone and when he asked who was calling the guy said his name, Kareem. Her father lost his temper, hung up on the boy telling him to never call again, and grilled her until he found out it was me who gave out the number. He proceeded to call me at my mom's house, curse at me, call me names and tell me to never see his daughter again. This was very hurtful and I never understood why a grown man would be so angry and mean because a black person called his house.

It is easier to see today how the dominant culture of society was represented in our school instead of being challenged. There was no discussion of race at all by the administrators or teachers. There was no clubs or activities where diverse people could get together to learn more about each other. I believe many of the staff there suffered from “impaired consciousness”. Nieto explains this as being “blind to the presence and impact of racism, assigning causality for racism to Blacks themselves” (Nieto pg 46).

Beth Wassell 6/27/07 9:48 AM  
Great analysis.

Their practice of silence in dealing with race did not discourage the racist beliefs forming within the students and did not help to stop these beliefs from being vocalized. I am so happy that Rowan University has taken it upon them to teach us and inform us of these issues. Our discussions in class make me hopeful that the generation we teach will not continue this behavior.

Beth Wassell 6/27/07 9:48 AM  
Me too, Jennifer!

Another influence in making me who I am today was my school district and the teachers in it. In third grade everyone took an IQ test. Those that scored over a 130 were placed in the gifted and talented program. I was one of these students. I was placed in the higher levels for all subjects. By junior high, I was in all honors classes. This would seem like a good thing, however, I feel like I fell through the cracks. I was and still am an intelligent person and I have always tested well. I never really felt like I got a lot of personal attention from teachers, however. I did well enough and got good grades through elementary and middle school. Once I hit junior high my grades started to slip. I had a hard time adjusting and needed some help in the motivation department. I was still in honors classes, but I was usually the one not doing my homework and just getting a B. By ninth grade there was no more gifted and talented program. I wish a teacher would

have taken me aside and shown some special attention to me. By seventh grade we didn't get any comments on our report cards unless it was bad. Since I wasn't failing or one of the highest achievers, I usually didn't get any feedback.

My younger brother, on the other hand, always had trouble in school. He wouldn't go at all, wouldn't do homework and fought my mom and me about everything that had to do with school. She was consistently meeting with teachers, Child Study Teams, psychologists and administrators to help him get through. Teachers called our house constantly and my mom was always up at the school. In my experience I don't think I ever had a teacher call home. Ever.

My experience is an example of the way schools usually only acknowledge students if they are the highest achievers or if they are in danger of failing. I was an upper level student, but my confidence was low. I did not fit in to any of the cool groups, could not get a boy to like me and now school was harder than before. The only classes I did do well in were the ones where teachers had high expectations for everyone and there was structure. According to Nieto, the effect of teacher expectations on the academic achievement of students is being taken seriously for the first time (Nieto p 47). Teachers and administrators' attitudes are being considered now to have an effect on students, in addition to individual ability and family life. As a future teacher, I must make myself aware of how I can affect my students' achievement in the classroom with my expectations, feedback and individual attention.

Beth Wassell 6/27/07 9:50 AM

Again – great analysis. This is a very important point.

These are just a few of the experiences that have made me who I am. I have become a tolerant, accepting person who strives for equality in our country. Gender

equality and racial and ethnic equality are at the forefront of my belief system. I cannot stand for any type of discrimination or for the lack of compassion I see in the world. I go out of my way to stand up for those beliefs any time I hear someone making sexist, racist or bigoted comments. I understand the need to make every student feel valued and special in the eyes of the teacher because students look up to you and want to make you proud. I think the years after I graduated high school and before I came back to college were instrumental in my development. I have a greater appreciation for the job teachers have and how important it is to society and to the individual child.

My central belief as a future teacher is that all students have the potential to learn and become successful students. Everything we have talked about, read about and worked through has only reinforced this idea in me. I look forward to having a classroom where all students feel invited, safe, cared for and important. The propensities we learned in our Putnam and Burke textbook spoke volumes to me. Considering I didn't see everything we discussed in our classroom in my field experience, I look forward to seeing examples of these in action, especially recognizing other groups as similar and help and be helped. In my school days, learning communities did not exist. We did not participate in collaborative learning or cooperative classrooms. I am thankful that research has been done showing there is a better way to educate our students. I feel I will use everything I've learned from life and school to be a positive member of these communities.

Beth Wassell 6/27/07 9:50 AM  
Good!

Beth Wassell 6/27/07 9:50 AM  
Or creating them in YOUR classroom!

Jennifer: Thank you for sharing such a powerful cultural autobiography. Your experiences with race and gender are revealing. More than that, you've done an excellent job analyzing them in terms of the texts that we have read. You've done an amazing job this semester; I'm proud of your hard work and critical

thought about the content. You will certainly be an excellent multicultural learning community teacher!

***Cultural Autobiography Rubric***  
**Rowan University- College of Education**  
**Teaching in Learning Communities: Summer 2007**

Component	Exceeds Expectations 100 – 95 points	Meets Expectations 94 – 75 points	Does Not Meet Expectations 75 – 0 points	Your points
<b>Content 100</b>	✓ Narration contains comprehensive, vivid, and nuanced descriptions of significant life events/themes and evidences substantial effort with recalling varying time periods and influences.	✓ Narration contains an adequate description of life events/themes and evidences some effort with recalling varying time periods and influences.	✓ Narration provides a minimal and/or incomplete description of significant life events/themes and evidences little effort with recall.	97
	✓ Exploration and interpretation illustrates thorough and rich analysis related to multiple aspects of cultural identity.	✓ Exploration and interpretation illustrates adequate analysis about multiple aspects of cultural identity.	✓ Exploration and interpretation does not illustrate adequate analysis about cultural identity.	
	✓ Reflection illustrates an advanced level of consideration about all aspects of the process and future implications.	✓ Reflection illustrates an adequate level of consideration about the process and future implications.	✓ Reflection on the assignment does not illustrate adequate consideration about all aspects of the process and future implications.	
	<b>Exceeds Expectations 50 – 48 points</b>	<b>Meets Expectations 47 – 38 points</b>	<b>Does Not Meet Expectations 37 – 0 points</b>	
<b>Organiza- tion 50 points</b>	✓ The essay is thoughtfully organized, captivating, and easy to follow.	✓ The essay is organized, interesting, and easy to follow.	✓ The essay is not coherently organized, does not evoke reader engagement, and is difficult to follow.	49
<b>Professional Writing 50 points</b>	✓ Assignment contains no significant grammatical, syntactical, or lexical errors.	✓ Assignment contains a few grammatical, syntactical, or lexical errors.	✓ Assignment contains numerous grammatical, syntactical, and/or lexical errors.	48
	✓ Writing is clear, concise, and organized such that it would be considered exemplary within a professional setting.	✓ Writing is clear and organized such that it would be considered acceptable within a professional setting.	✓ Writing is unclear and/or disorganized such that it would be considered unacceptable within a professional setting.	
<b>YOUR POINTS (200 points possible) 194/200</b>				

