Connecting literacy teaching to identity recognition

Class projects that empower bilingual

Helen Du and Fang Jia

**Case I Tony (pseudonym) -Burden of Expectations**

Every morning of weekdays, he carries his heavy bag to school, like most students do, an iPhone full of games and messages, and with a high expectation from pals and parents.
 He used to carry many dreams about life, fancy ones: he wanted to be a soccer player — — like Cristiano Ronaldo — — when he was in elementary school; he dreamed to be tennis player — — like Novak Djokovic — — when he was in middle school. As so far, none of his dreams from youth ever seem to come true, and he has to forbid the dreams he carries, and move to a high school student routine, which is simply carrying the dream of getting an outstanding GPA, and get to a top college.
Waking up at 6:30 in the morning, spending 30 minutes going over his WeChat (a social media used in China, similar to Facebook) and carries it to school with a full battery. The time difference between New York City to China is 12 hours, so when he is sleeping, it’s the time for all his old pals posting fun things on WeChat. There are usually plenty of unread messages and post notifications on his phone, so once he has a free period, he will get his phone out, and check what his friends are doing in the other part of the world. As always, it’s distracting him away from the school when Chinese New Year comes. People in China are having vacations while he is stuck in the classroom enduring yet another average school day.
 It’s been 2 years for him -- who is originally from China -- studying in the U.S., to be honest, it was definitely hard in the beginning. Just imagine transferring to a new school where everyone is a stranger, and being in a new country that speaks a different language, also shares a different culture. At the beginning, he couldn't understand anything in class, teachers’ lectures are long and boring, and it’s hard for him to focus. As a result, he got a solid C on his first major test in the U.S., which absolutely failed expectations from himself, his friends, and his parents.
 He talks to his friends in China once in awhile, sometimes they ask him “Are you going to an ivy league college? If not, why did you go to the U.S.” It becomes a tag on international students, if you don’t attend a top-ranked college, your friends will look down at you, and he definitely doesn’t want to feel that way. Moreover, it’s not just as simple as the expectation from friends, it’s about the expectation from the society. He went to an internship at a bank this summer in Beijing, the administrator talks a lot about the recent application requirements trend in China, and stated that companies in China have higher expectation for international students, if their attended college doesn’t have a high ranking, his/her resume won’t even be examined. Although it’s kind of early to know this process, he feels a burden on his shoulder from the society he lives in. He carries those expectations to school every day, tries to motivate himself that way. But once he doesn’t do well on a test, he would feel like he has failed it, all the way through.
He was born with a twin sister, who attends same kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, and high school with him, and always does better in school. It’s frustrating to be compared, even though his parents never make it an issue, he still carries the pressure. He also has many cousins, all are older, one just graduated from Shanghai Jiao Tong University -- one of the best universities in China, one graduated from Cornell University years ago, and one is currently attending Yale University. All those well-known universities leave a burden on himself, carrying it every day. Although his parents never ask him to attend any universities, he feels that if he doesn’t go to a good enough college, his cousins will look down on him, those hanged out with him when he was a kid, will no longer be in the same “categories” together, due to the “international students tag”.
 Just years ago, he was so free that expectations just didn’t come through his mind, even though bags were still heavy, once he takes them off, he can still run without any resistances. The things he carries now, all those expectations, will not fade away easily. It’s the society we live in. If only he could shake off these burdens, focus on himself, and fly freely without these intangible weights.

**Case II Amanda (pseudonym)-Coffee, Football, Art and More**

 My exciting high school life began with an unexciting problem about the pronunciation of my name. The suspicious spelling of my first name perplexed most of the innocent teachers school-wide. With a fierce mental struggle, they finally burst out my easier-to-pronounce last name, Wang, or Wan as they said it. I did not know that I was Wan until it was clear that I was the only possible candidate that fit the last name. “Cherry,” I shouted out immediately, “you can call me Cherry.”

 Cherry marked the start of my assimilation efforts. Soon after figuring out that sophomores loved to bring an iced coffee to the morning homeroom, I pledged my allegiance to the Party of Coffee Drinkers, though my hate for coffee was real. It was a dismay to the local coffee sellers who lost my monetary support shortly after a sophomore told me that she liked tea better. As snobbish as I could be, I threw a farewell to macchiato and moved on to Irish tea, the new love of my morning. But not for long, my mentality was once again tested by another group of enthusiastic coffee supporters who claimed coffee was the best. Awkwardly caught in between, I thence declared my neutrality on soy milk, a drink that I am most comfortable with. Also, I quit loving the Patriots, and picked up my badminton practice, as I found out that not every high school student is crazy about a football game.

 I started an art club. This club had miraculously gathered eight attendees in the club fair that was dominated by Frisbee brothers and pop-music acolytes. Along with the club, quite a few signed up for my figure drawing workshop in the Art Day at school. The practice of drawings eventually led to the arrival of my first Nikon DSLR, first mirrorless Fuji, first external flash… the list goes on and on. I began to talk about myself. We started discussionS about our passion for drawing, photography, painting, and threw in jokes and funny stories.

 It was the time of winter break, so I went back to China to catch up with my friends in middle school.

 “Haha you speak like an American now!”, one of my friends joked.

 Then on my flight back to Rhode Island, I thought about coffee, football, art club and more. Honestly, iced macchiato with whole milk doesn’t taste bad. I think I will have soy milk one day and coffee the next. Maybe someday I will like football more, but for now, badminton stays at the top of my sports list. When school resumes, things might get a bit different since all small talk will be about all the things that happened during Christmas. I do not celebrate Christmas, so I think I may listen to their conversations but probably share my Chinese new year celebration ritual with them.

 As the school bus slowly pulled away from the school gate, I thought about my self-introduction at the beginning of my sophomore year. Cherry, as I said, was not at all my real name. The girl is Wang Ying Xuan, who likes to drink soy milk and coffee, and once in awhile watch some football games; who loves drawing, enjoys photography and will spend days and nights to catch the best shot.

 It’s now the time for the class meeting. Anxiety and excitement hit me like surges of waves, suffocating my breath, cramping my stomach and at times exhilarating. Things are different this time. Art was the thing that gave me energy, and I believed it would keep me strong and connected. Whether it is Chinese, American, or Chinese American, art carries the same language that shares universal meaning and connects us all.

 “Hey guys,” I wiped out the sweat in my hands, “how are you all doing?” I looked around and smiled.

**Resource list**

**Poem writing**

Teaching procedures and strategies

<http://homepages.neiu.edu/~sociolgy/confdocs/Where%20I%20Am%20From.pdf>

<https://penandthepad.com/write-where-im-from-poem-4615832.html>

**Oral history**

Oral history lesson plans <https://www.saada.org/resources/lessonplans>

UCLA-Asian American oral histories

<http://www.library.ucla.edu/destination/center-oral-history-research/collections/subject-areas/asian-american-history-oral-histories>

**Art supplies at a low price or for free**

Facebook Groups: “Buy Nothing (+your town/city)” or “Everything is free (+your town/city)”

Jerry’s Artamara:

<http://www.jerrysartarama.com/discount-closeout-art-supplies>

Blick:

<https://www.dickblick.com/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI9tn29dCn2wIVF9lkCh0Y5gSlEAAYASAAEgKYvvD_BwE>

**Online tools for creating animated gifs**

[www.EZGIF.com](http://www.ezgif.com)

<https://gifs.com/>

<https://giphy.com/create/gifmaker>

**Free online tools for producing digital stories**

Storyboard (easy to use, flexible layouts and abundant image materials)

<http://www.storyboardthat.com/>

Wevideo (5-minute video for free)

<https://www.wevideo.com/>

Voicethread (for making a presentation-like digital story)

<https://voicethread.com/>

**Books about identity exploration**

*The Name Ja*r by Yangsook Choi (2001)

*I hate English* by Ellen Levine (1989)

*The Great Wall of Lucy Wu* by Wendy Wan-Long Shang (2011)

*American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang (2006)

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz (2007)

*Return to Sender* by Julia Alvarez (2009)

*You Bring the Distant Near* by Mitali Perkins (2017)

*The thing around your neck* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009)

*East to America: Korean American Life Stories,* Elaine H. Kim & Eui-Young Yu (1997)

**Presentation references**

Christensen, Linda (1998). Where I’m From: Inviting Students’ Lives into the Classroom. Rethinking Schools, 12(2), pp. 22-23.

Christensen, Linda (2017). Reading, writing and rising up, Rethinking Schools Ltd.

Gee, J. (2000-2001). Identity as an analytical lens for research in education, *Review of Research in Education*, 25, p.99-125.

Teaching tolerance (2018). Oral history project, retrieved from:
<https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/student-tasks/do-something/oral-history-project>

Troullot, Michel-Rolph (2015), *Power and production of history*, Tantor Audio.