Adolescent Development with Soul through SOLE

By Sarrah J. Grubb

Alice Lloyd College

Soul Work

Friday, November 18, 2016, my Adolescent Development class in the rural college where I teach prepped our room to run a seminar they had planned for the Development of the Young Child and Technology and Media classes. I observed from a corner of the room while the students arranged the desks into one big conference table and greeted the other classes as they arrived. Within minutes, they were working together on the poverty scenario "SPENT" that was developed by the ad agency, McKinney (2011), for Urban Ministries of Durham. The scenario sets the scene: You lost your job. You lost your house. You have $1000 dollars and need to make it through the month. After choosing to pay approximately $800 for rent and daily travel expenses and taking a job that pays $300 weekly after taxes and health insurance, the player is forced to make choices, such as: "Your child came home in tears and threatens to stop eating lunch because other kids made fun of the 'free lunch kids.' What do you want to do? Add lunch money to your budget ($3/day) [or] Risk them going hungry;" or "Your landlord found out you have a pet, and now you have a $350 pet fee. What do you want to do? Pay the fee [or] Take your pet to an animal shelter [or] Ask a friend to take your pet;" or "The flu has been going around—and it just hit your house. Your child is running a fever and has the chills. But you're supposed to be at work. What do you want to do? Stay home from work [or] Send them to school sick [or] Leave them home alone" (McKinney, 2011). In this way, SPENT shows how the experience of losing a job can radically change the types of decisions one must make.

After everyone completed the scenarios, two students led a discussion on how SPENT made them feel and what they thought about the scenarios. Students shared that they felt "terrible" and "stressed" trying to make choices that would get them through the month when their preferred choices would break them financially. For instance, one student mentioned they had to choose to "hit and run" to have enough money to make it to payday. One lamented having to put a pet to sleep because the medical care for her fictional cat would put her into debt. After sitting silently for several minutes, another student exclaimed incredulously, "Would these things even happen all in one month to the same person??" After the rest of the class assured him that a car could break down the same month that your child has the flu, your car registration comes due, and you need a root canal, the talk turned to how poverty manifests in the public school classroom.

Adolescent Development students shared their goal for the class, "How will knowing/experiencing this class session help me become a better teacher?" Students discussed issues they could control (meeting with parents at times convenient to all work hours or over the phone, not having students bring in tissues and paper towels for extra credit, not letting socioeconomic status decide a student's educational expectations) and what they could not (the parents and families the children have, current economic conditions in their communities). Students shared first-hand experiences from their schooling, as all but one of the students had attended public schools within two hours of the college. At the end of the two-hour period, the Adolescent Development class surveyed their fellow students.

Overwhelmingly, the Young Child and Technology classes were positive about their experience. In reflection, an Adolescent Psychology student said, "At first I approached

it [the SPENT scenario] as a game, but as it went on, I realized that people live through this, that this was not a game." She went on to explain her change of perspective and how this might impact her teaching in the future.

While I added anecdotes as requested by students, I mostly observed as my class confirmed my assessment that, at this point in the semester, my students no longer depended on me to learn content. Their engagement stemmed from their own curiosity, personal experiences, and desire to become teachers.

This is soul work.

During a plenary session of the June 2016 Currere Exchange Conference, Dr. Denise Taliaferro Baszile named *currere* "soul work." There isn't a better term.

The phrase went to the back of my mind as I moved with my family to teach at a small college in the Appalachian Mountains. For the past twelve years, I have lived and worked and advocated for rural places and rural schools and rural students. Now, as Assistant Professor of Education, I prepare future teachers from rural places and spaces to work (in many cases) in the rural schools where they grew up. And the work I am doing in collaboration with my students is my definition of soul work.

Like many professors before me, in preparation for the semester, I chose a textbook from a popular company and worked up a syllabus detailing chapters to read and assignments to be done. In mid-August, I began teaching education-oriented adolescent development to students pursuing a certification to teach middle and high school. I designed the course based on my goals, experience, and department curriculum expectations. This method had been modeled to me from the time I was an undergrad through my graduate schooling. Despite my enthusiasm to work with pre-service teachers, my desire to assign a chapter, lecture over it, and then assess my students quickly waned. It may have constituted "traditional" teaching, but no one was learning much. My students were compliant in completing assignments but were not connecting deeply to the content. When I imagined moving to teach in higher education, I dreamed about deep conversations about teaching and learning. I began to look for a different way to meet our goals.

WHAT IS A SOLE?

By the beginning of September, I had abandoned PowerPoint overviews in exchange for application-based classwork. Then, I showed my small class the 2013 TED Talk, "Build a School in the Cloud" by Sugata Mitra. Mitra describes his "Hole in the Wall Project" where different groups of non-English-speaking students in rural India reliably taught themselves both English and how to browse and play games on computer equipment without direct instruction. When he directly tried to disrupt his own work by having non-English-speaking students learn a sophisticated science topic, in addition to teaching themselves English and how to operate a computer, the students (rural and poor) achieved similar test results as a control group (urbanized wealthy students with a special teacher). He named his technique a "Self-Organized Learning Environment" and often refers to it as "minimally invasive education." In this method, a teacher poses a deep and interesting question and then "stands back and admires the answer" (Mitra, 2013). Essentially, the teacher sets an important and meaningful goal. The students take care of the rest. SOLEs honor the fact that students are not blank slates without context or experience. Traditional practice, a teacher lecture followed by students repeating what the teacher said in various forms (worksheet, quiz, multiple choice test), doesn't. Or at least, not the way I was doing it. I ended class that afternoon by asking the students to prepare to answer the following question on Monday: "Could our class be a Self-Organized Learning Environment?"

I hoped that students would be enthusiastic about re-orienting our work. The weekend gave me time to think about everything I deeply believe about education, namly that teaching and learning is a collaborative journey. Respecting individual students means acknowledging that we all bring a variety of experiences into the classroom. The word "professor" carries weight with it, and the words I say and the methods I use carry weight. They often are emulated and repeated to others as "Truth." Respectful education means recognizing this power and sharing it with my students, especially since I want them to do the same when they can officially claim the word "teacher" as their own. I had an uncharacteristic bout of nerves before entering my class Monday afternoon. Thankfully, I was greeted with an enthusiastic group "Yes!" in answer to my question. Within minutes, we decided to "blow up" the syllabus I had painstakingly created over the summer. Before we went about the reconstruction of the course, we tackled the question: What obstacles do we need to jump over to implement a successful SOLE? I captured their answers in a series of slides:
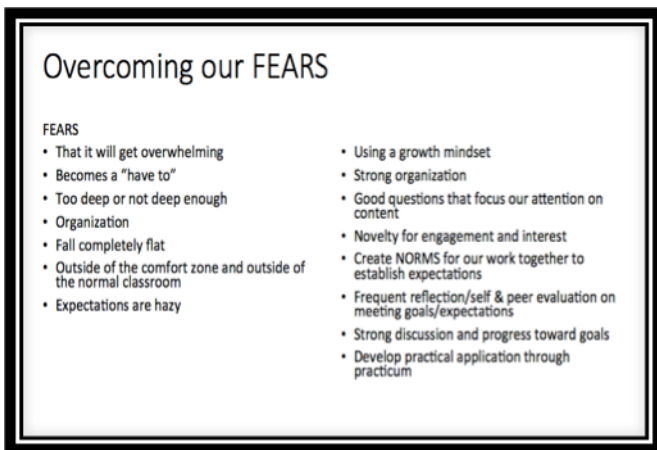
Pros

- We have to learn the content
- Learning is self-motivated
- Sparks from our curiosity—we actually want to learn it
- Our questions matter
- We have to do the search—just not given to us
- At the end of the semester, it is more rewarding
- Against the spoon
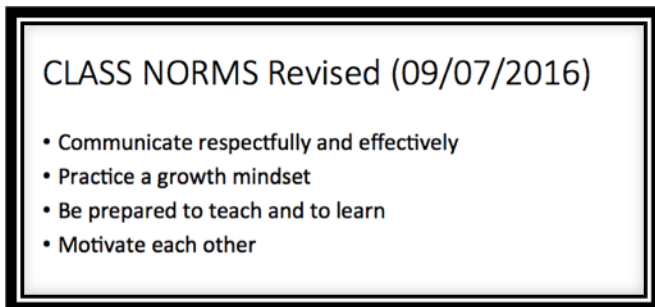- Self-dictated learning
- More challenging

Cons

- More time-consuming
- More challenging
- Misconceptions might develop
- Missed content
- Unconsciously unskilled

Opportunities   VS   Fears

- More creative
- Learn more with SOLE
- Learn how I prefer to learn
- See a meaningful project through to the end
- Move past the textbook
- Classroom community
- Try something completely different in the classroom
- Future planning and application
- Charting new ground (writing/presenting about our experience)

- That it will get overwhelming
- Becomes a "have to"
- Too deep or not deep enough
- Organization
- Fall completely flat
- Outside of the comfort zone and outside of the normal classroom
- Expectations are hazy

Overcoming our FEARS

FEARS
- That it will get overwhelming
- Becomes a "have to"
- Too deep or not deep enough
- Organization
- Fall completely flat
- Outside of the comfort zone and outside of the normal classroom
- Expectations are hazy

- Using a growth mindset
- Strong organization
- Good questions that focus our attention on content
- Novelty for engagement and interest
- Create NORMS for our work together to establish expectations
- Frequent reflection/self & peer evaluation on meeting goals/expectations
- Strong discussion and progress toward goals
- Develop practical application through practicum

We discussed pros and cons of becoming a SOLE and how we might overcome our fears of going about our formalized learning differently. As a class, the students decided to take the risk. Together, with me as a collaborative participant, we developed four norms of our work together.

CLASS NORMS Revised (09/07/2016)

- Communicate respectfully and effectively
- Practice a growth mindset
- Be prepared to teach and to learn
- Motivate each other

Then, we went through the course syllabus, including the curriculum goals of the course and created "big questions" for the students to tackle. We devoted timeframes for the content based on what topics might be most important (including how many pages their original textbook devoted to topics). Below are images of the original syllabus, in its neat and tidy state, and my copy of the syllabus, including copious notes written on the document and post-it notes added to the bottom when I ran out of space.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

WEEK	CONTENT/ASSIGNMENT
Week 1 August 17	**Introductory Work** **Perspective, Communication Styles, Growth Mindset** *Chapter 1 of Ryan Book*
Week 2 August 22	Ryan Text: Chapter 2 & Assignment
Week 3 August 29	Ryan Text: Chapter 3 & Assignment
Week 4 September 5	Cognitive and Intellectual Development
Week 5 September 12	Cognitive and Intellectual Development **PROJECT 1**
Week 6 September 19	Ryan Text: Chapter 4
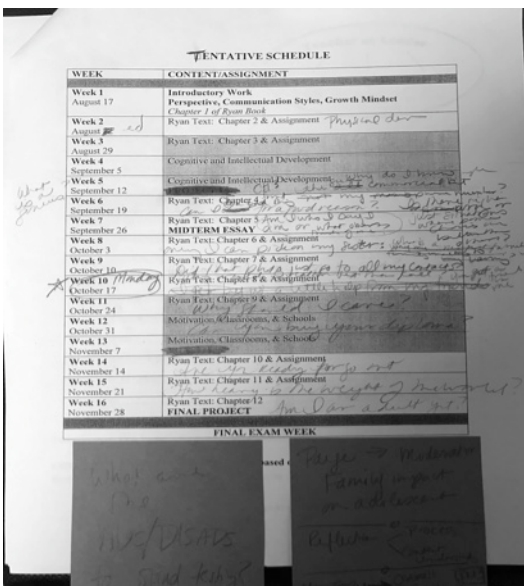
Again, as a class, we agreed that reflection would be important to make sure we learned content and stayed on track for achieving course goals as a group. At the end of each instructional period, the students completed a two-fold reflection: (1) What do I understand about the content now, and how it will help me be a better teacher? And, (2) How did our SOLE work today? The students also determined that their midterm and final essays would integrate reflection on the process of the SOLE, as well as their understanding of the content.

During the semester we wrestled with questions like: "What is genius?" (what gets labeled as genius and how that impacts our interaction with students) and "How do you carry the weight of the world?" (adolescent depression and the impacts on students, families, and schools). We explored questions and content that challenged us to understand student motivation, memory, and physical and emotional maturation that would impact the way we work with students and support their growth as learners. Many times, the articles classmates shared were contradictory. Sometimes, the time we planned to spend on content needed a shorter or longer time frame than what was

originally scheduled. (Shorter time frames were especially painful, as it is awkward to realize that some content didn't warrant the time allotted for the discussion.) Sometimes, we realized we neglected a topic entirely and added it into our study. On occasion, students conducted the class without me.

At midterm, I asked the students to answer if they would prefer to continue with our work as a SOLE or if we should return to traditional instruction. One student responded:

> So far this semester, the Ed 320 class has been so different from any other class I've been in before. It has opened my eyes and broadened my thoughts on education in general, and regardless of how everything turns out at the end of the semester, I'm glad I've had this experience of being offered a different approach to learning in the classroom….This is probably the most responsibility I've ever had in a class, and I am enjoying it. I think this opportunity to take control of my own learning is motivational in the sense that no one is really "making" me do anything, but what I learn is genuinely stemming off of curiosity, and that makes learning so much more exciting.

All agreed that the method was challenging, thought provoking, and ultimately worthwhile. (Even though their thoughts were sometimes hard to capture in the double-entry journals and often required gentle prodding—and reminders that we agreed journals would make up the major part of their grade for the semester—to capture the concepts that they talked easily about in the classroom discussion.) The group went on to teach fellow students about the impact of poverty on students in their future classrooms. By the end of the semester, each student responded that they were planning to use SOLE in their future classrooms. One student held a modified SOLE in their practicum classroom and received positive feedback. In a final reflection, a student mentioned, "The biggest pro...the freedom and autonomy that came with it [the SOLE]…opened up doors to learn in a way that was fun for me and not out of force or in fear of a bad test score….I'm thankful that I had the opportunity this semester to be part of this class." The same student created this visual to explain the impact of SOLE on her experience as a student:

I teach in the heart of Appalachia at a small private NAIA college where students in Appalachian counties can attend tuition-free. Many students are first-generation college students and attended the public preK-12 districts within a two-hour radius of the school. Most of my students plan to return to their home-counties and school districts to teach upon graduation. It is also important to note that the students are products of the "testing regime" and are extremely familiar with teach-to-the-test instruction and a narrowed curriculum that discourages open-ended questions. So, using SOLE in my classroom is necessary to push their thinking and encourage their discussion of what learning and schooling can be beyond standardized testing. The struggle resides with the open nature of this work and requires reassurance that their grades and understanding will not suffer because they take this risk. This encouragement is necessary and relaxes these students as they take this leap. I have to play the role of safety net. This semester, before we create our norms and design our syllabi, we will explore mindsets and *currere* more pointedly. This structure will serve two ends. One, my students deserve to have a voice, beyond the twang and limited intelligence representations in the media. And, two, this time allows my class to get to know me as I model my education philosophy for them before expecting them to follow and then lead.

Preparing this submission forced reflection that I would have been tempted to delay as I begin my second semester teaching entirely different classes. Reading through my student reactions and reflections rekindled the urge to encourage students' confidence in their ability to learn on their own and teach others. Content Literacy students were surprised this week when I presented them with a syllabus that listed each week of the course and the course goals but little else. However, after describing the overall goal of becoming a better teacher and how our SOLE would help them to reach that goal, they are excited to begin. (Especially with the reminder that, just because they will be planning and sharing, doesn't mean that I disappear. Content understanding will grow, despite the unfamiliar method.) One student commented off-handedly as he left class, "That blew my mind," and another added, "I can't wait to get started."

In the end, we could call this strategy in engaging students in content many different things: inquiry, question-based learning, Socratic seminar... But in the end, "soul work" is entirely appropriate. If teachers do "teach how they were taught," then hopefully my students will honor their students with similar pedagogy. This is where I get my energy. Working so intensely and collaboratively with my students is necessary not only for their understanding and motivation to learn the content that "must" be taught; it is also necessary for the soul of the teacher. SOLE work *is* soul work. I can't wait to get started either.

Postscript at Midterm

Now, it is midterm in our Content Literacy course where we are using SOLE work for soul work, and students are turning in midterm essays as I complete this writing. Another forced point of teacher reflection that I appreciate, even as I wrangle with how to put a grade on the growth the students are experiencing. (A student alludes to that struggle in her essay, as she points out that she is in the middle of developing her understanding, yet I am expected to grade her "wrestling match with herself" at a point in which her philosophizing is still incomplete.) In this course, I intentionally and gently introduced the concept of *currere* through the reading of the introduction to Poetter and Googins' (2017) book, *Was Someone Mean To You Today? The Impact of Standardization, Corporatization, and High-Stakes Testing on Teachers, Communities, Schools, and Democracy,* and a group discussion over the definition of *currere*. As a

group, the students are coming to an understanding of what it means to be "content literate" and have gone so far as to grapple with the idea of math literacy being a civil right denied to them and others when the goal is only to "get the right answer." But this agreement has been hard won. We have had fits and starts and our share of awkward silences, as we struggle with our own desire for a "right" answer. It is how we have been trained after all.

Through honest discussion and one-on-one journal feedback (which this class is much better at completing in a timely manner), we have pulled ourselves to this point in the semester. We have met the course goal of critically considering what it means to be literate in a content area. And that's enough to renew our excitement to take our seats at the table, the actual one where we gather across from each other at 3:00 PM on Monday and Wednesday afternoons, as well as the proverbial one where educators must engage to advocate for students.

References

Baszile, D. T. (2016, June 2). *Currere plenary session*. Speech presented at *Currere* Exchange, Miami University, Oxford, OH.

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Poetter, T. S., & Googins, J. (2017). *Was someone mean to you today? The impact of standardization, corporatization, and high stakes testing on students, teachers, communities, schools, and democracy*. Cincinnati, OH: Van-Griner.