

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVES: DIVERSITY AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM

AN INTERACTIVE PRESENTATION

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Discourse,” Jack Mezirow (1996) writes, “is not a war or a debate; it is a conscientious effort to find agreement, to build a new understanding.” At the same time, he reminds readers, “reaching a consensus is a theoretical goal but not the only function of discourse” (p. 170). Discourse within a diverse classroom is characterized by a complex interplay of consensus and dissent, of making meaning and of acknowledging the experiential limits of our understanding. This interplay is a constitutive element of Transformative Learning.

What does it mean to speak of and to seek agreement and shared understanding in a pluralistic learning community composed of individuals with significantly, at times radically, different experiences, backgrounds, expectations, and goals? Decentering authority within a diverse classroom and encouraging students to engage with, interrogate, and contest established academic conventions and disciplinary formations opens up a discursive space that can be at once exhilarating and cacophonous, empowering and perilous.

Tensions and anxieties come to surface when students and teachers confront and interact with others whose lives differ, in fundamental ways, from their own. How and where can we speak with authority, and how can we foster and sustain dialog among interlocutors whose ways of knowing and strategies for communicating are shaped by experiences of marginalization and empowerment, of alienation and community, to which we have no direct access?

As we move with our students beyond the familiar territory defined by academic and social conventions, we enter an uncharted intellectual and interpersonal space defined by our differences both from one another and from the public selves that we have been conditioned to perform. In the process, we become active participants in Transformative Learning. The poet, critic, and activist Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) explores the “transformations [that] occur in this in-between space, [this] unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries” (p. 1) where we encounter, in one another, forms of diversity both expected and unexpected.

Anzaldúa (2012) examines the effects of the “multiple, often opposing messages” that circulate in discourse communities composed of individuals with varied, often intersectional identities and values. She observes that, “the coming together of . . . self-consistent but habitually incomparable frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision” (p. 100). Transformative pedagogy invites us to develop strategies, drawn from our experiences and those of our colleagues and students in different disciplines, to realize the transformative potential of this “shock” to our conceptual systems.

How can we be most effectively engage, challenge, and empower demographically diverse groups of students to share and to interrogate their varied experiences of race, class, gender, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, ability, and other aspects of self-identification in order to cultivate learning, to

discover new knowledge, and to engage in shared leadership within the classroom and in the wider community?

“At some point, on our way to a new consciousness,” Anzaldúa writes, “we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes.” Our goal as transformative teachers and learners is to share this kind of authentically transformative learning experience by helping students in diverse learning communities to explore one another’s experiences, to appreciate one another’s unique perspectives, and to place their own experiences within wider social, cultural, and interpersonal contexts.

SELECT REFERENCES

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