

## Achieving Transformation through Workforce Diversity: An Interview with Chaunda Scott

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*This editorial interview was conducted with Dr. Chaunda Scott, who works as a professor of Human Resource Development and Graduate Coordinator of the Human Diversity Inclusion and Social Justice Graduate Certificate Program in the Department of Organizational Leadership at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan.*

**Zoe** Tell me a little about yourself and some of your background.

**Chaunda** Okay, well I'm a professor in the department of human resource development at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. My research, teaching, and service are all connected to workforce diversity issues and my main area is eradicating racism.

I have about eight co-edited books out on similar topics. I am also a secretary of a nonprofit organization in my hometown, which is Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the nonprofit is Minnesota's Black Community Project, and we were formed in 2016 to shed light on what African American success looks like in Minnesota.

As you know, most of the time when we see African Americans on the TV or on the news, it's negative. You know they're not really promoting the positive side of what the community is doing, so we formed to do that, to build off of my father's work who had been doing that in the 50s, 60s, and 70s.

Our book came out in 2020 *Minnesota's Black Community in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, building off my father's work which is Walters R Scott Sr., and we ended up getting book of the year. We were so grateful for all of the workers. Your own Dr. Jeanetta Sims contributed to the book as well, so we're very grateful for her.

**Zoe** That's wonderful. I would like to look at a couple questions regarding what you've done in your programs. How do you view the role of transformative learning when seen through the lens of workforce diversity?

**Chaunda** I see it in the same way I believe the founder of transformative learning, Jack Mezirow, did. He was one of my professors at Teachers College in Columbia University. I was very grateful to have the opportunity to meet him. I think one of the principles of transformative learning is that you know you've changed and others can see the change within you. I would say that, within the field of workforce diversity, you know there is much work to be done, but again it's really being acknowledged in society as a concept. Not only do I see it, but the world is seeing it, businesses are seeing it, academic programs are seeing it. I really see that as a transformative step in the work that I'm doing.

**Zoe** Have you had any unique experiences with transformative learning, perhaps through your work with the Fulbright Program?

**Chaunda** Right, well with my Fulbright experience in 2015, I was granted a Fulbright Specialist award that took me to Cape Town South Africa. I was working with the professors and administrators of Cape Peninsula University of Technology, and they were really looking to advance their workforce diversity learning curriculum. Since I've done some work in that area, I was able to share some of my practices with them to help them get started. I thought that it was good to be recognized on an international level for the work that I'm doing and then going to South Africa... I see that as very transformative.

**Zoe** I see that the 20<sup>th</sup> Diverse Voices Conference is coming up.

**Chaunda** Yes, you are very correct. I can't believe it myself. It was a conference that I really started when I first came to Oakland University. After coming from Harvard Graduate School of Education, it just felt very innovative. People were thinking and thinking of ideas and actually bringing them to life, and I just really thought that was so fascinating. After engaging with conversations with my classmates, finally when I graduated I was like "it would be great to keep this conversation going." So that was the start of the diverse voices conference and it's really just a platform where students, faculty, staff, and community members can talk about a topic together. Students aren't graded; they volunteer to participate in it. It has really been a wonderful journey.

I had two of my undergraduate students last year who went to one of my professional conferences the NAMS conference and they did an excellent job. They were speakers in the conference, they wrote a paper and they ended up getting the Best Paper Award. That's transformative in itself.

**Zoe** What types of transformation do you think have been the most challenging for you or your students?

**Chaunda** Diversity itself has been a kind of difficult topic to talk about through the years. I think now, because there's more evidence of the impact that diversity has in society, whether it be negative or positive, as seen with the events surrounding George Floyd, Briana Taylor, police brutality, and all these other things. All these things are coming into view and I think that, as a person who does that type of teaching in research and service, it has really helped me get the message across, even though the scenario itself is not as positive as I would like it to be.

I think that because society is showing us that we need these discussions, we are the ones that are going to solve these problems. So in some respect, I appreciate the help and I appreciate the people who are seeing it the way I'm seeing it. After all, it's not just me seeing these issues. I mean, the society is beginning to see it, and this is really helping me in the sense that I don't have to convince people to see it.

**Zoe** Looking to the classroom, what does transformative learning look like to you in your classes and how do you embed this in your curriculum?

**Chaunda** Well, as of 2019 I created a graduate human diversity inclusion and social justice certificate program. I was feeling that students, especially at the graduate level, are not really getting out with information on that topic. When they go into their careers they aren't using any sensitivity training or anything that they've studied, but what they've learned in the business field there. Taking people from the human resource development field and related fields and

turning them into chief diversity officer. Like, how can you be a chief diversity officer if you haven't had academic preparation to do that?

I created this program and it's been very popular with students. All over the country, they are applying or asking to see if the program is online—it is. It is offered in three different formats online, blended, and lecture format. I just finished an intensive class a couple weeks ago, and I was just amazed at some of the research topics that students were picking, things like the importance of pronouns. Students are talking about social justice in the community, social justice at church. They're really thinking about where their role is in the places where they go. I really found that to be quite impactful. To see students we had, like a really good group of students will be speaking in the 20<sup>th</sup> annual Diverse Voices Conference. It's just wonderful.

**Zoe** So you get to see your efforts come full circle?

**Chaunda** Right. I mean, you know, you get that passion in the class. For example, some students are working with younger children with autism and they come in and explain their day-to-day routine with us. They advance the learning for that community. It's wonderful.

**Zoe** Now, you've been a member of the Editorial Advisory Board here at JoTL for several years. What drew you to our project?

**Chaunda** I was invited by Dr. Sims to participate. Because I had had Jack Mezirow as one of my teachers, I know a lot about transformative learning and I firmly believe in its practices. I was really attracted to it and excited to find that there was a journal that was really focused on that. Dr. Sims has published some pieces of our work in there. She has the Diverse Scholars Program and I published the Diverse Voices Program in one article, so people could see how we can integrate those diverse practices into our teaching research.

**Zoe** What would you say is the most practical advice you would give to educators who have desire to enter programs like those you've participated in? Also, how would you advise these educators to create this sort of infrastructure themselves?

**Chaunda** Well I would say "be led by your passion." Meet people at your university who are doing this work, to have a sounding board. If those people aren't there, go to your professional conferences—that's where I met Dr. Sims. We don't work at the same university, but there are a lot of opportunities to meet likeminded people to be encouraged by.

I stepped out on my own to create the Diverse Voices Program as a very novice assistant professor and it wasn't always positive. I had gotten a couple of responses from people that I sent things out to, who I had told I was getting ready to start the Diverse Voices Conference. I got one response I will never forget, it had said "what about the people who don't value diversity?" I mean, I was appalled, but I responded and said "Well then, that's the conference you should start."

I learned from one of my professor Cornel West, at Harvard University, that not everybody is going to be supportive of everything you do. Don't be deterred by that. He said we need to be encouraged by that, because it shows that there's a need if people are really willing to respond negatively. That resistance should encourage you. I mean, 20 years later and the conference is still going, students still asking when it is and if they can be in it. It's just wonderful to me.

**Zoe** How do you believe organizations and professionals can be practicing transformative learning in their daily lives? What benefits can it have for them?

**Chaunda** Well I'll go back to a principle that I mentioned earlier. You're trying to do something; you're trying to change yourself; you're trying to learn something, and then you do it and not only do you feel good about it, but other people notice and give you accolades. I think that a real strength of transformative learning. It's not only for yourself, but other people can really enjoy or participate in your transformation. It's sort of like the concept of people losing weight. You see it and other people do, too. Transformation doesn't just take place with your inner self, because sometimes you can tell yourself "Oh, I look great" at 50 pounds overweight, but you now when transformation is happening when other people can really see it.

**Zoe** Lastly, is there anything else that you would like to add or expand on?

**Chaunda** I would say that as I move on my journey in my research, I'm currently working on a handbook for anti-racism in human resource development with Dr. Marilyn Byrd from the University of Oklahoma. In that area, workforce diversity and diversity education in general racism has not been part of the conversation. It's been gender, sexual orientation, age, all of these things, but not racism specifically. I believe that racism is the root problem and that, until we try to get to the root cause of the problem, it's just like putting a band aid on, you know? I'm really happy to expand my research more in that area. I believe we need more classes for students at all levels to talk about racism and social justice, because students are the future and we don't want to keep going in that vein that we're going in, right?

**Zoe** That's wonderful. Thank you so much for your time, I have no further questions.

*Author's Note:* Zoe Wright is a JoTL editorial research assistant who recently graduated with her MA in Composition and Rhetoric.

*Citation:* Wright, Z. (2022). Achieving transformation through workforce diversity: An interview with Chaunda Scott. *Journal of Transformative Learning* 9(1), 4–7.