

Redefining Pedagogy: Dialogues on Transformative Immersion, Praxis, and Reflection

Authors' Names and Affiliations

William Robertson, Ph.D.¹, Judith Munter, Ph.D.², Lyn McKinley, M.A.³

¹ Department of Teacher Education, 500 University, UGLC, room 312, College of Education, The University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, Texas, USA, robertson@utep.edu, (915) 747-8559

² Department of Teacher Education, 500 University, College of Education, The University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, Texas, USA, jmunter@utep.edu, (915) 747-5572

³ Department of Teacher Education, 500 University, College of Education, The University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, Texas, USA, lyn.mckinley@gmail.edu, (915) 747-5572

Corresponding Author

William Robertson, Ph.D., robertson@utep.edu, (915) 747-8559

Department of Teacher Education, 500 University, UGLC, room 312, College of Education, The University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, Texas, USA

Abstract

This article examines transformative teaching and learning in higher education today, with a focus on faculty member as change agent. Developed from fourteen months of ongoing, critical dialogue, the article describes and deconstructs faculty members' lived experiences as scholars-practitioners in three nations and their corresponding roles in institutions of higher learning in the U.S. As multi-culturally situated practitioners, each one describes the role of diverse international/intercultural lived experiences, including Fulbright exchanges, community based research, and service-learning in and with diverse communities. The voice of an emerging scholar, (graduate student) as discussant is interspersed throughout the dialogue, connecting faculty members' experiences with scholars' writings on educational praxis and practice (e.g., Boyer, 1990, 1991; Dewey, 1916, 1938; Freire, 1970, 1994; Groenewald, 2003; Mezirow, 1997, 2003), leading to discussion of transformative immersion, praxis and reflection and pointing to new directions in teaching and learning through culturally engaged pedagogies.

Keywords

transformative, teaching, learning, international, multicultural, praxis, higher education

1. Introduction

“Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world”
— N. Mandela, 1994

This article examines transformative teaching and learning in the increasingly complex world of higher education in the 21st century. Presenting highlights of more than one year of dialogic discourse (O’Connor & Michaels, 2007) and participant observation, linking three nations, two languages, and multiple cultures, we describe and deconstruct the lived experiences of scholars-practitioners and their journeys to re-invent themselves and their classrooms, embedded in public institutions of higher learning. As multiculturally situated educators, each has experienced transformative learning personally and professionally through international/intercultural experiences, including Fulbright exchanges, community service learning, problem-based learning, bilingual education and culturally engaged pedagogies. They have crossed geographic and metaphorical boundaries, opening new windows of thought and understanding for communities and educational institutions undergoing transformations. The combined experiences suggest new perspectives on faculty members as agents of change, contrasting with the traditional role of the “sage on the stage”. The personal and professional transformative experiences, described here as immersion, praxis and reflection, are integrally connected to the processes of developing ‘insider knowledge’ (Campbell, 2013) and deeper understanding of the transnational worlds in which their students live and will lead as professionals.

The study is set in the context of unprecedented challenges and opportunities in higher education. Numerous studies (e.g. Robinson-Pant, 2009; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005) have examined the widening gap between higher education policies and the 21st century college student, uncovering little evidence to suggest that new approaches are in place to address the needs and the potential of today’s students. Rather, the norm in colleges and universities across all disciplines, including programs that prepare teachers for K-12 schools, is to focus on professors “teaching as they were taught” (Goodlad, 2004), relying primarily on lecture style and instructor-centered classrooms. In contrast, demographic data suggest that change is the new reality of college campuses; rapidly increasing numbers of transnational students, first-generation college goers, and nontraditional students, have drawn attention to the need to develop policies and practices that will serve 21st century college students (e.g., Gilroy, 2014; Hamilton & Marcus, 2011; Nuñez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Recognizing the implications of these new realities, this article positions the voice of student leader, Lucy¹, who centers and guides the dialogue. Cognizant of the need for engaging student voice in meaningful change, Lucy speaks to the commitment, passion, talent and leadership of today’s students. Her interest in politics, advocacy, and activism opens doors for new directions in both design and direction for faculty work. The project begins by interrogating the ways in which individual scholars/practitioners relate the stories of their own journeys into unfamiliar terrains, and follows by relating the processes leading to the transformation of their practice and praxis in higher education, closing with reflections on these transformative processes.

2. Higher Education Today: Demographic Transformation

In recent years, transnational border crossing has become increasingly common and while the U.S. Hispanic school-aged population (K-20) has increased dramatically in recent decades, numerous scholars and practitioners (e.g., Berliner, 2013; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Tienda, 2010) agree that educational institutions have fallen short in efforts to serve this population.

¹Throughout the narrative and the entire article, pseudonyms are used for persons and places to protect identities.

Researchers predict that this population will triple in size and account for most of the growth in the U.S. population by the year 2050 (Capps, Fix & Murray, 2005; Passel & Cohn, 2008). Transition points in the continuum, such as the passage from high school to college, have been a focus for practitioners and policymakers. Recent data (Gilroy, 2014) indicate that in 2013, Latinos surpassed whites in college enrollment. However, while there have been gains in admissions and enrollment, gaps remain. For example, the share of U.S. Latino adults with a bachelor's degree is 13.4 percent, significantly lower than that of whites (31.8 percent), Asians (50.3 percent) and blacks (18.7 percent) (Gilroy, 2014).

Furthermore, disproportionately represented among first-generation college-goers, Hispanic students face personal obstacles to completing a college degree as they are more likely to combine work and school, often also assuming family responsibilities while enrolled. According to Gándara and Contreras (2009), "Never before have we been faced with a population group on the verge of becoming the majority in significant portions of the country that is also the lowest performing academically. And never before has the economic structure been less forgiving to the undereducated." (pg. 18)

While some describe the barriers to Latino student success in terms of deficits (e.g., 'limited English proficiency'), critical scholars and new voices have looked beyond these tired clichés. For example, a recent study showing that the percentage of Hispanic students who graduate from college in six years or less continues to lag behind that of white students, also reveals that, "this data shows quite clearly that colleges and universities cannot place all of the blame on students for failing to graduate." (Steinberg, 2010) Universities, like other public education institutions, are struggling to respond to today's changing demographics and to understand the implications for academic instruction, assessment, as well as on student life. In this article, the faculty member's lived experience, not only her/his content expertise, is viewed as a catalyst for generating a crystalline response to these challenges, leading their own and others' institutions to change.

New (and old) voices in academia have long made the claim that higher education must begin to shift pedagogical approach from cavernous lecture halls and anonymous student identification numbers to a more student-centered approach, focusing on generating authentic connections, with "...you, the student, who you are, and where you come from." (e.g., Berta-Avila, 2003; Crowther & Martin, 2005; Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970; Thompson & Biffle, 2008).

3. Pedagogical Models: In Search of New Directions

In weaving together the voices of scholars and practitioners from diverse perspectives, we question both practice and praxis in academia today. Presented in the shape of a dialogue, the sections that follow highlight a "new voice" (i.e., a graduate student) guiding and interrogating the "experts" (i.e., professors), facilitating the give-and-take and providing direction to the exchange of ideas, weaving the student voice into the dialogue in ways that both re-shape and re-create the faculty members' visions of democratic teaching and learning. Building on the body of research and study (e.g., Giroux, 2003; Klomegah, 2006; Roberts, 2011; Villalpando, 2004) concerning academe's pedantic approach to fully serving the 21st century transnational student, this voice queries but also links the scant research on the role of faculty members in changing the academic learning experience of transnational students in higher education with the project at hand - transformative teaching and learning in the academy.

The article attempts to link discussion of new pedagogical models in higher education with faculty members' vision and praxis. For example, the combination of service to the community with academic learning is one of the modalities described as pivotal, a perspective that moves community engaged research "from the margins to the mainstream." Building on Boyer (1990; 1991), Mezirow (1991; 1997; 2003), Dewey (1916; 1938), and Freire (1970), the processes of

personal/professional transformation are re-imagined, as Lucy leads the way. The goal is new conceptualizations of pedagogy, created with respect and love of and for the other and the self (e.g., Darder, 2012; Freire, 1994, 1998; Horton & Freire, 1990).

Following here we provide a brief review of transformation theory, examining its applications and implications in three related and distinct contexts. Lucy guides the reader in describing the journeys, highlighting the exploration of new terrain, border crossings and moving beyond traditions and norms to imagine new possibilities for learning and teaching. In this section we discuss those variations as *transformative immersion, praxis and reflection*. We also point to the ways in which institutional change and faculty roles are connected. We then present the methods and context of the study, including a discussion of the paradigmatic assumptions that have shaped the direction of the research project since its inception. In the final section, Lucy discusses implications for scholars and instructors in higher education.

4. Listening to Voices Old and New

The dialogue that follows is in itself a journey of inquiry that leads the reader through three countries, two continents and multiple pathways. With graduate student, Lucy, as guide, we describe distinct yet connected journeys, focusing the narrative on the dynamic inquiry process as focal point for individual personal growth and reflective praxis. Within each individual story, Lucy's voice attempts to interpret the case, weaving the voices of the teacher-practitioners with the voices of scholars whose theoretical work provides an analytical framework for discussion of the findings: Boyer's (1990) pivotal work on priorities of the professoriate, Mezirow's description of perspective transformation (1991) Dewey's foundational work on experience and learning (e.g., 1916; 1938), and Freire's extensive work on emancipatory education (1970). The themes developed by these scholars become an integral vibrant essence from which the narratives take root, envisioning new directions that presage a vision for education in the 21st century. The findings lead to new perspectives on culturally engaged learning (Hess, Lanig & Vaughan, 2007) as conceptual model; community based research, (Gelmon, Jordan & Seifer, 2013); critical globalization research (Johnston & Goodman, 2006), and new methodologies and goals for research in higher education (e.g., Beverley, 2005; Cornwall, 2004; Charmaz, 2009; Gaventa, 2004; Kemmis, 2008; Stoecker, 2003).

4.1 Transformative pedagogy as aspirational project: Lucy's voice

During the six months I spent in Cuernavaca, Mexico, language was not about power. Language was about caring, opening your home to a person you hardly knew, whose goals were so important to you that you gave them a bedroom in your home, fed them, and actually nurtured them in ways that they needed but didn't know. Somehow, you did know and focused on them in real time. Originally, I went to Mexico to study Spanish, but learned so much more, whether engaging in learning the subjunctive in a language-school classroom, sipping manzanilla tea at a café downtown, or riding rutas (public transportation) every day from my host family's home on the outskirts of town to the school in el centro. Mexicanos and one gringa on the bus, a school boy in his private school uniform, women heading to the market to buy chicken and fruit, men on their way to work. We sat together and talked as the bus bumped over ancient roads, each on our own voyage into familiar but distinct worlds. Soon the strange became the familiar for each one of us, the days passing for me like lightning. The professors I interviewed for this qualitative project also experienced transformation, through living in different geographical locations as educators, through experiencing the strange as the familiar, both professionally and personally, developing more in depth knowledge into the transcultural worlds in which they lived and taught. They crossed geographic and metaphorical boundaries in an effort to open new windows of thought and

understanding. They made time to talk about transformative teaching and learning during their overly crowded university schedules of teaching, meetings with students and colleagues, and the constant push-pull of research and publication.

As a graduate student, I know them respectfully by their PhD nomenclatures. Yet they allowed me to enter their worlds on a first-name basis, our distances of protocol breached for several hours during our interview periods. Each spoke of their own transformations through service learning, Fulbright fellowships, and personal experiences in distinct teaching and learning environments during their careers. Their experiences can be distilled into themes of transformative immersion, praxis, and reflection. (Lucy)

4.2 Perspective transformation: Mezirow's voice

Much of the literature on transformation theory finds its roots in the seminal work of Mezirow. His original research focused on women returning to college through re-entry programs (Mezirow, 1975), work that led him to identify ten phases of what he called the "personal transformation process". From the first phase, presented as a disorienting dilemma, through self-examination, reflection, exploration to action and reintegration, this model has been integrated into the literature on adult learning, often discussed as perspective transformation (e.g., King, 1998; Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1991).

For Mezirow, adult learning may be depicted as a process through which a person confronts a situation that causes him/her to reflect on previously held beliefs, assumptions, or perspectives, often based on experience. New perspectives may be explored. At this point, transformative learning may occur but, some would argue (e.g., Cranton, 2011) that the experience is not truly transformative until perspectives deeply change and actions change as a result. The transformative experience opens up perspectives, widens viewpoints, and challenges fundamental assumptions that shape a person's worldview, as lived experiences are viewed through new lenses.

Morgan (2011) extends Mezirow's discussion of a "disorienting dilemma" as part of the learning process, describing international/intercultural travel as a vehicle for transformative learning. Experiencing a culture outside of the familiar typically creates a dissonance that the willing traveler must work through if he or she is to truly engage and thrive in the new cultural environment. In their Fulbright journeys, these professors exemplify this facet of Morgan's approach to transformative learning. As Morgan states, "Travel permits or rather necessitates a disruptive encounter with 'Otherness' that drives the transformative learning process" (p. 252).

During his Fulbright travels in Chile, David experienced dissonance between cultures and described his new role as a foreigner immersed in a new environment. He describes the processes of making the strange familiar (Agnew, 2009), highlighting implications for his transformative learning personally, as a traveler in a new land and, professionally, as an American educator participating in a cross-cultural teaching and learning experience.

Myths of perceptions were dispelled by the realities of relationships and personal interactions with real people. Most of the students I encountered ... had never met a person from the USA face to face, and I had the unique opportunity to get to know people and to help them see beyond the stereotypes of the media as to what a person from the USA is like.... In that way, I was a bridge between Chile and the USA, and this was a part of my experience that I did not comprehend completely until I was well immersed in my time in Chile. Personally, I think it was this experience that had some of the greatest impacts, as the myths of perceptions were dispelled by the realities of relationships and personal interactions with real people. This worked both ways, as my understandings and perceptions did change, and now I have become a more understanding and competent teacher through

this experience, an experience that has reshaped me as an educator and, ultimately, as a person.

Transformative teaching and learning occurred naturally through engagement in the world of the other, as described in David's personal and professional experience during his Fulbright. He described himself as taking on the role of the 'Other' among his Chilean university students and colleagues. David's experiences and new understanding exemplify what we describe as 'transformative immersion'.

4.3 Authentic teaching and transformative praxis: Freire's voice

A major contribution attributed to Freire is the insight that education is always political. By its very nature, it never is nor can it be neutral; rather, it always serves the interests of some and impedes others. The power of this insight, from Freire's perspective, is that teaching and learning can lead to liberation and that educators and students should see themselves as "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux, 1988). Traditional forms of education, (i.e., 'banking' education) prevent dialogue and change; problem-posing, on the other hand, regards dialogue as indispensable to critical thinking. Freire (1970, p. 54) contrasts a 'banking' model of knowledge creation with a 'problem solving' model.

In a banking model, the researcher assumes that he [sic] has all of the answers—knowledge becomes 'a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing', and does little to discourage passivity (1970, p. 53).

Moving beyond these traditional approaches to instruction, these professional educators have intentionally learned how to listen to and learn from their students in diverse contexts, who have in many ways been teaching these professional educators to "read the word and know the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987) in new ways. This is a very collaborative process, and for some the most transformative experiences stem from learning with our communities and the students enrolled in our classrooms, whether they are elementary children or college students. We posit that context and geography, a 'pedagogy of place' (Groenewald, 2003) merit attention as significant components of this dialogue.

During her years abroad in Ecuador, Sarah entered into a world of the 'Other'. As the only 'gringa' (i.e., northamerican) in a small rural community, Sarah was an object of attention, as villagers marveled at the interest of a young American woman in small-town Ecuador. An elementary school teacher, she did not arrive with the anthropologist's field notebook, digital recorder, or self-conscious cultural expectations. Soon she was teaching children and adults everything from piano to how to write simple sentences in their native language. The schools were so humble that students often sat in each other's laps for lack of desks.

As a teacher, I was simply living and working in an international setting...living with families, travelling extensively around the country, and learning a lot about a whole different world view. And different ways of seeing life, of making sense of everyday things, so the familiar became strange because I was always the foreigner of course, learning to make my life in Ecuador familiar, particularly became natural for me as I lived with families."

Sarah's experience mirrors Morgan's (2011) discussion of movement (i.e., travel) as a key component of transformative learning. That is, learning to adapt oneself to the rhythms of an initially different culture than one has previously encountered through the purposeful choice of

international travel, especially when it includes short-or long-term residence abroad. We describe this active, experiential mode as transformative praxis, centered on active exploration and change.

We take a break, and I check to make sure my digital recorder has captured this rich interview. As I reflect, I see themes emerging of transformative immersion, praxis, and reflection as well as different definitions of transformative teaching and learning emerging from the voices of these informants.(Lucy)

4.4 Learning from experience: Dewey's voice

Building on Dewey's philosophy of education, authentic teaching and learning occurs most authentically outside of the confines of the classroom, in the context of real world settings. Inquiry involves problematization of experience, or creating an uncertainty that "perplexes and challenges the mind" (Dewey, 1938, p. 13). Teaching and learning outside of the academic classroom, as described by these faculty members when recalling international teaching and learning, provide examples of authentic pedagogy, building on the principles of continuity and interaction. That is, experiences build on previous ones and are then further directed through guided reflective exercises. An implication of these principles is that the development of knowledge is directly related to context and interaction. The purpose of the interaction is to derive learning from experience through reflective thinking.

As a professor/administrator at a Hispanic-serving institution located on the U.S.-Mexico border, David recounts the challenges of second language acquisition as a key to his own transformative learning. His description of intercultural perspectives in his work is based on the bilingualism that characterizes the border context.

I started getting the idea that here, on campus, English was the language of business and Spanish was the language of life. Everything—the social fabric—was all done in Spanish. And so, if you wanted a, sort of, complete life here, you had to engage in both. And so, for me, that was a place where I needed to be... engaged in things not so much academically at times, but also socially and culturally, along the border. Once I started to recognize...how familiar things are here on the border, meaning they are centered on the family, and the relationships socially really define what we can do here at the university, it made for a much richer experience. (David)

This reflective voice is re-cast as transformative reflection, leading to profound changes for David personally and professionally, leading to rethinking curricular approaches and his own teaching voice.

5. Finding our Center: Higher Education in Transition

In recent decades, public engagement has emerged as a new direction in higher education, with terms such as "the engaged campus," "civic engagement," and "the public good" commonly found in institutions' mission statements (e.g., Harkavy, Puckett & Benson, 2007; Holland, 2001). International exchanges, involving travel to distant lands, or community service learning models, engaging with diverse communities in our own towns and cities, stand out as examples of higher education's potential new directions, culturally engaged learning, with implications for connections to the lives of transnational students, first generation college-goers, and other underrepresented voices. Numerous studies conducted on teaching and learning in higher education (e.g., Darder, 2012; Villalpando, 2004) indicate that new pedagogical approaches can

change the foundational assumptions of academic coursework, bridging the gap between theory and practice, linking the ivory tower with communities. From this perspective, college life becomes authentic and transformative, helping academics provide opportunities for students to discover connections that are meaningful and relevant, relating theory with the lived realities of community life.

More than two decades ago, Boyer's treatise on new paradigms in scholarship (1990) challenged the traditional paradigms, arguing that:

American higher education has never been static. For more than 350 years, it has shaped its programs in response to the changing social context. And as we look at today's world, with its disturbingly complicated problems, higher learning, we conclude, must, once again, adapt. It would be foolhardy not to reaffirm the accomplishments of the past. Yet, even the best of our institutions must continuously evolve. And to sustain the vitality of higher education in our time, a new vision of scholarship is required, one dedicated not only to the renewal of the academy but ultimately, to the renewal of society itself (p.81).

A growing chorus of new voices (e.g., Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Chambliss, Alexander & Price, 2012; Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012; Lynn & Parker, 2006) point to new directions linking higher education to social change. A democratic classroom is one where the students and professor together constitute a community of inquiry, where the professor is also a co-inquirer, a participant who, like her/his students is trying to figure things out, to uncover meaning as a co-learner (Apple & Beane, 2007). From this perspective, teaching and learning become a place of high risk and high ambiguity, taking chances in unrehearsed situations. This is as true for the elementary classroom, where teachers welcome learners going to school for the first time, as for the college classroom with adults going to college for the first time, or seasoned academics leaving their homes for a Fulbright exchange to live and learn in another country and culture.

This is where learning really occurs, however, the risks are real. In times of increasing accountability demands and shrinking budgets, university educators are faced with a conundrum, and the need to balance divergent priorities has led many to rethink assumptions. Approaches to teaching and learning that cross boundaries are rarely rewarded by traditional tenure and promotion guidelines, and many new faculty members are frequently cautioned to focus on familiar approaches to content delivery, admonished by their experienced peers to be cognizant of 'playing it safe' as ideal. As pedagogical practice, the integration of new approaches such as 'place-conscious education' (Schroder, 2006), that bring together global and local knowledge through community-engaged learning, takes time to develop, forcing faculty members to develop authentic relationships with stakeholders outside the 'ivory tower'. Furthermore, acknowledging students as active, reflective, and resistant agents in their own educational processes forces faculty to reconsider basic accepted norms of instruction as content delivery. For many, the notion that academic knowledge comes directly from the instructor, in a classroom, based on a written text, is irrefutable. The decision to invest time, energy and resources in expanding the walls of the classroom endeavor can be a daunting challenge for both experienced and junior faculty.

6. Conclusion

While the culture of higher education has changed little, the changing demographics of higher education today provides fresh impetus to policymakers and practitioners committed to change. In this journey with our 'travel guide', Lucy has outlined the importance of fresh perspective, cognizant of changing contexts and demographics in higher education today. Building on the recent work of scholars and practitioners (e.g., Butin, 2005; Hess et al., 2007), she reminds us that while there may be perils in rethinking the traditional classroom, the potential benefits

outweigh the challenges. From Lucy's perspective, there is much to be hopeful about. We close our dialogue with Freire's inspirational call to action and to vigilance:

Progressive educators ought to ... keep their eyes always open, along with their ears, and their whole soul – open to the pitfalls of the so-called hidden curriculum. Hence, the exigency they must impose on themselves of growing ever more tolerant, of waxing ever more open and forthright, of turning ever more critical, of becoming ever more curious..... The more tolerant, the more open and forthright, the more critical, the more curious and humble they become, the more authentically they will take up the practice of teaching (Freire, 1994, pp. 80-81).

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