

GIVING STUDENT LEARNING CENTER STAGE

Transformational teaching and learning may become a process of evocation if the teaching-learning relationship begins in the students' own stories. Such a process is inductive, personal, and critical. I tell the story of my transformation from a kind-hearted, liberal, teacher-centered professor to a democratic, student-centered one. Three student stories describe how my individual work with graduate students writing theses continues to move me toward a more empowering pedagogy — one that gives student learning center stage.

By
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Armed with the beliefs that learning could be transformational through mentorship, academic rigor, and feminist politics, I entered the teaching scene at Alverno College in 1974. I developed a course called Small Group Behavior and loaded it up with sophisticated reading from the Symbolic Interactionist tradition (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1970; Manis & Meltzer, 1972). Students reacted to the work load predictably, but I successfully defended it — at least throughout the first half of the course. Then came the mid-term — an extensive, take-home, short-essay exam. Claudia stood up to protest. She was furious not only with the work load but also with what seemed to her my mistrust of them: I was giving them a test. Her attack on me was deeply personal, yet at the same time it struck at the heart of what we had been reading about — constructing meaning from symbolic interaction. I thought:

“Did they not understand that this was their opportunity to integrate the work in the class? Did they not understand that I was held accountable for their learning

and that I needed to see more clearly what that learning was? Did they not understand that they were in an institution where assessment of learning was at the heart of the process so that we could send into the world confident, capable women who would compete with men on their own terms, advance in the power structure, and make room for more women?”

Before I could speak, Claudia was joined by several other students in what I experienced as an attack on me, and it was clear that she was indeed representing a substantial group of them.

I remember leaving the classroom feeling devastated but somehow knowing that there was more to this than met the eye. How we actually resolved the issue and went on are almost beyond my memory. I taught the course again. I did not make concessions in the work load because I intuitively knew that I needed to be true to my own mission to these women. I had gained so much from the demands placed on me by my own caring faculty members; they were my models in those early years of teaching. I

did not feel that I could teach a lesser course just because the students did not like the work load.

I could, however, make the structure of the course more explicit. I believed still in a cognitive, linear model of education; that is, if the students knew exactly what might happen, they would not get into a conflict with me. I thought maybe I had not been clear enough about the nature of the assessment in the class. So I informed the next group that there would be a substantial take-home exam in the middle of the class as well as at the end. But the same thing happened — a revolt of sorts in the middle of the class, although this time about a different issue. The third time I taught the class, I was able to get hold of the meta-principles at work: *The proof of the success of the class was in the students' revolt.* I began to see that the teaching of symbolic interactionism and construction



of meaning (which included assertiveness training), the Alverno teaching-learning-assessment process, and who I was as a feminist teacher, created a climate where the students could practice their newfound confidence.

Now I am cautious about interpreting student upset and revolt as an indication of suc-

cess, as that could be self-serving. However, I began to receive support for this interpretation. From the first revolution, Claudia wrote me a long letter three semesters later, thanking me for the opportunity to, for the first time, use her voice authentically. Diane from the second revolution wrote me yearly for nearly 10 years, and Cynthia from the third sought out all my classes and continued to work on understanding how to integrate her intuitive and emotional reactions to a situation with a more analytical understanding of that situation.

My experience with student revolt was a consistent pattern until a transformation occurred in my teaching. My pedagogy was very teacher centered, although it was interactive and experiential in some form. I had been influenced, while at Alverno, by Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, a hierarchical framework of knowledge. Bloom (1956) and Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964) reduce knowledge to cognitive and affective functions. I came to understand my students' revolutions as a form of affective development. That is, as they comprehended and applied content, they could take risks with external authority. Concomitantly, I learned that I could handle situations that used to scare me.

I began to understand that being safe was not the same as being comfortable. Conflict in classes was still uncomfortable, but I came to value that it was the real, rather than the artificial, fertilizer for development,

for the students and for me, and that some of the most important learning came from us walking through those uncomfortable times together. I could not at that time, however, write into a lesson plan "Week 6 — Revolution."

At Alverno, I was also introduced to a learning cycle frame-



work, one that challenges the linearity and epistemological reductionism embedded in Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. Kolb's (1984) four modes of learning—Abstract Conceptualization, Active Experimentation, Concrete Experience, and Reflective Observation—struck me as a more integrative model of learning. Alverno, based on Bloom's work, encouraged teachers to *begin* teaching with Abstract Conceptualization and then move to the more experiential aspects of the content. By definition, we worked *deductively*, moving from theory to experience. Still, when we worked from theory, we were by definition teacher-centered. I, the teacher, had the theory. They, the students, were to learn this theory from me.

When I moved to Pacific Oaks College, I learned from Jones's (1986) theory of experiential, constructivist learning for adults and studied educational implication of cultural dominance (Cooper, 1991; Darder, 1993; Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. task force, 1989). I also came "out" as a lesbian in

my life as a faculty member, an experience that moved my understanding of dominance and resistance to oppression from a theoretical to an experiential level. These events led me to transform the use of Kolb's cycle (1984) — to *start* my teaching in *Concrete Experience* and proceed through Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. By starting my teaching in *Concrete Experience*, I began to work *inductively*, moving from experience to theory. Such a seemingly small shift made the former teacher-centeredness of my work apparent. I had to construct new ways of thinking and teaching.

Experiential, constructivist learning has a long history at Pacific Oaks. In 1986, Elizabeth Jones, a Pacific Oaks faculty member, published *Teaching Adults*. In this and other books (e.g., Jones, 1993; Jones, 1995), she and other faculty at Pacific Oaks developed an experiential, interactive approach to teaching that is radical. Similar to Paulo Freire's liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1973; 1995; 1997), Jones transforms the teacher as expert into the teacher as facilitator, midwife, consultant — where the learner engages in construction of her own learning through an emergent co-constructed curriculum. Students' stories became the core of my experiential pedagogy. Their stories situate the class in content, which allows them to interact with the content in ways that transform them and, often, transform the content — a true symbolic interactionist's dream.

Student Stories: Thesis Process as Transformation

I chose to practice my newly acquired understanding of pedagogy with individual students working on their thesis project in a thesis proposal preparation course. I wanted to test out the process of democratization and gain skills. The thesis chair role seemed an ideal place to begin. If I could make it work in the thesis setting, I would feel more confident turning over a whole classroom with more traditional content to an emergent, constructivist pedagogy. Elizabeth Jones refers to the student's story as a narrative thesis (personal communication) — the stories often have the original motivation for learning, and so, when those are tapped, they bring engagement and energy to the student as she learns. Our faculty does not recommend that all students do a narrative thesis. Such a recommendation is based on a dialogue between the student, the faculty chair, and the committee. Some students do not have enough "critical incidents" in their lives to warrant a thesis study, some are unwilling to share their life with the public in such a form, some are not able to reflect and build theory from their own life, and some have other interests that preclude a personal thesis.

As the faculty member who teaches more than 50 percent of the thesis preparation courses, I ask students to write what it is in their personal life experiences that has brought them to this

thesis project topic. They may include how their own family of origin or childhood relates to the topic as well as their own developmental processes and present-day life as people and professionals. I tell them that it is important that the thesis topic be connected to their lives as our philosophy at Pacific Oaks is that the construction of knowledge should have personal meaning and, more importantly, that we have an ethical responsibility to understand our own context and raise with ourselves the questions we intend to ask the participants in our study to help us explore. The beginning of transformation can almost always be seen in the development of the theses' Personal and Background/Problem statement.

I have chosen three students' stories to illustrate the transformation of student and teacher when learning starts with student experience.

Leslie's Story

Enrolled in a thesis development class offered over three full weekends four weeks apart, Leslie Pano (1997) began her thesis project during the first weekend by telling me privately that she was interested in exploring the cognitive development of bicultural children. She is third generation Japanese. I *invited* her rather than *challenged* her to write more about the personal and societal ties she had to the project. I wanted to be sensitive to the power difference between us not only as faculty and student but also as Euro-

pean-American (dominant culture) and Japanese-American (non-dominant culture). Because we have internalized different cultural rules, I feel insecure about the tension between the rules for interactions in dominant culture and those in non-dominant culture, and my interactions with Leslie always had, to me, a tentativeness to them as I knew that I, even in my own culture, can be perceived as too direct and directive.

Leslie then told me that what she really wanted to do was to share with her own generation of Japanese-Americans the secrets of the internment experience. Further questions from me led her to state that she needed to understand the gap in her parents' history, the years in the internment camp, and their experience with anti-Japanese racism that followed World War II.

She wanted me to be her thesis Chair. She provided me with my first experience of a narrative thesis — centered in the student's own story. It put my understanding of the tension between academic rigor and emergent curriculum to a test. How would I know the thesis was progressing appropriately when I did not have the traditional structure of a clear research question? If the thesis

was a personal, bicultural narrative, how could I guide Leslie in probing further into the Japanese culture because she felt excluded from an important historical part of it? How could I, a dominant-culture assertive white woman assist her in a culturally sensitive inquiry with first-generation Japanese people? These are still questions for me about cross-cultural work. But I trusted that I could scaffold deep personal learning. One of the more difficult insights from this work is that when a person of non-dominant culture tells me what would be helpful to her, even if it is as indirect as in Leslie's case, I have to be willing to support her within her own framework, that is, to move the center of the power relationships in the teaching-learning process (hooks, 1994).

Leslie came to the second weekend with another idea. "Maybe," she stated, "the question is not so much understanding the experience of that generation, but understanding what my own father has gone through, events that have shaped him and as a result shaped the relationship we have." I continued to help her connect the thesis project to her own need, and she uncovered her concern about a disconnection in her generation from the Japanese culture — maybe she needed a traditional Japanese teacher. "Go write," said I.

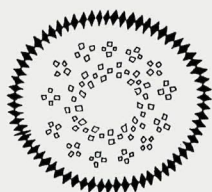
What I began to get in the mail was nontraditional writing. She began the project by reading ferociously and then placing her own experience within the

context of the readings. Her use of personal experiences was clearly an illustration of the theoretical principles she studied and it extended the conceptualizations.

Her continued writing led to yet another formulation. Maybe it was not the teacher she was searching for; maybe she already had the teachers. Could she do the thesis project about the transmission of culture from the grandmother in Japan, through the mother, first immigrant, to herself? By now, it was clear to me that this thesis had a life of its own and that my work was to be the midwife. But she tested me; I had not ever before worked with a thesis student who went through such changes.

I found myself drawing on my experiences as a mountaineer and backpacker. Leslie saw a ridge against the sky, and we thought it was the goal; however, when she reached that ridge, we could see the next ridge up and knew we both had another climb. Each climb up to a new shelf would give her (and then me) an expanded view of the territory below as well as a new "top."

Leslie continued to read, reflect, think, and write, and I read in bits and pieces. One month I would receive work in the literature review section, another month transcripts from interviews with another Sansei woman, and another month reflections on the discovery methodology we were employing. A clear picture was not yet emerging, and I told her that I did not want to make many suggestions



as she was meeting all our criteria for a thesis in an unusual way. I did not hear from her for nearly five months. Then, I got a large package with all her writing so far.

She wrote me, "I hope the Teacher has not given up on the Student," an intentional pun referring to the third thesis topic she had had. I read her work, and at the end, when she said that she was now seeing how this thesis had been about finding herself as a Japanese *Sansei* woman, I knew she was finished with the data gathering, which had consisted of her own life history, her life as related to the readings, interviews with other bicultural women, dialogues with her mother, and her mother's carrying of questions to the grandmother in Japan. She had transformed herself in the context of the thesis. She integrated her historical familial cultural context with her present day life in America.

This sort of thesis is a process of *theory-building*. Now I could help her place the writing into a more organized structure, something I did not dare do earlier for fear of disrupting *her* process with *my* structure. I practiced a different use of my power, both as a teacher and as a person of dominant culture in terms of race. This practice necessitated that I implement a way of teaching and learning that made room for a different expression of reality in the writing of the thesis project. For some, it is important to learn to fit into the dominant culture ways; for others, it is important to find who they are as bicultural

people by working in their own cultural style of discourse. I need to be willing to err on the side of the students' expressed desires after some exploration with them. That is, as dominant culture faculty, I continue to learn that I can better afford the discomfort of teaching by learning from the students what they need, even when I do not understand it clearly, than *they* can afford to be told once more that their needs are not going to be met. Leslie is going to be able to work with bicultural experiences, as a cultural broker for bicultural people as well as dominant culture people. Because she understands the issue of biculturality intimately, she is connected to the issue, and she has processed it in both an academic and a personal way through the thesis.

Lucy's Story

Marriage, Family, and Child Counseling major, Lucy Solomon (1997), came to the thesis class as a returning student who earlier got stuck in the thesis proposal process. A long time, successful re-evaluation counselor (see Jackins, 1973; 1982; 1994), she was struggling with developing her own thesis in the face of departmental pressure to conform to traditional psychological perspectives. Lucy is Hawai'ian-Okinawan and presented an excellent argument for the need for liberation from racism, classism, sexism, and ageism for parents. "In neglecting these issues," she claimed, "traditional therapies further oppress the powerless."

Lucy told me that she got stuck because she refused to spend her time defending and critiquing the traditional theories. I *listened*. I listened for the *energy* that is Lucy, for the developmental space, if you will, from which the thesis would emerge. I heard *her* in conversation with me and in her beginning writing. Sometimes, my job is to help students express the theory that they are clearly working out of.

I supported her in laying out her theory and did not find it audacious of her to think she knew that the psychological giants did not have re-evaluation counseling and, therefore, liberation to offer. Not an easy task. I sold her committee members on the idea that she needed to develop this work and they needed to walk with her. They did not want to support her in continuing to deepen her re-evaluation counseling skills; they wanted her to broaden her perspective, in spite of her clear insistence that she had examined other perspectives throughout her time at Pacific Oaks and found them wanting. I cared enough to find out what kind of experience and stature she carried in the re-evaluation counseling community and I wanted to see more of her work.

Her thesis is more traditional in format than Leslie's or the one I will speak about next. It has the traditional headings, and the data consist of excerpts from the taped three or four re-evaluation counseling sessions that she conducted with three parents. The object of these sessions was to help the parents let

go of their own unclear thinking about parenting from their own experiences and fear and begin to build a better relationship with their children through focused, attentive, special time.

When I read the final draft of the thesis, I realized that something was missing. In our quest to meet the traditional requirements, we had almost left Lucy, the person with whom we had started the thesis, out of the conclusion. It was more intuition than critical thinking that



made me ask her to write one more section called Lucy Revisited. When I received it, it was clear to me that without it, neither Lucy nor I would have known what a transformational experience the thesis had been. It prompted her to rewrite her introduction to the thesis to include in the Personal and Background statement the experience of being of Okinawan ancestry, how that had affected her parents and herself; and she addressed, at the end of the thesis, how she understood the thesis as a link in her developing commitment to assist the growth of teachers, parents, and adolescents. Reviewing the conclusion with me, she sobbed over her own experience of having needed a person like herself as she raised her own children.

Through her research, she forged a new relational link with her own mother, and she examined and rejected her growing pessimism that the liberation work was not enough and a little too late.

Sarah's Story

Sarah Theberge (1997) is a European-American woman who came to the weekend thesis development classes and told me that she wanted to use her thesis to develop a curriculum to include gay and lesbian parents of children in early childhood/primary grades. With Sarah, I used an approach that is fairly consistent for me when I wonder if I am working with a dominant culture member who wants to "do good" for non-dominant culture people; that is, I challenge them. They often have an enormous amount of personal work to do about the carrying of privilege and entitlement *before* they begin to understand the nondominant culture experience. So I asked her, "Why do you want to do that?" She told me that she had a son, now eight years old, who she was sure was gay. As a matter of fact, she had been sure since he was about five years old and had suspected prior to then. She described him, his play, his interests, his thinking in such detail that it was very clear she had a child with what may be called exceptionally atypical gender interests and behavior. So I said to her, "What do you *really* want to do your thesis on?" She tearfully said she needed to figure out what to do as a mother of a

probably gay child. We agreed that she could start simply by exploring the experience of being the mother of this child.

I worked on this thesis knowing that Sarah was not the only one with a personal issue at stake here; I did too. I have come to understand that the most significant social changes on behalf of non-dominant people come from dominant people acting as allies. Sarah was developing into an ally not just to her son but to gay and lesbian people. But the process was painful for Sarah. I had to challenge and support over and over again. A narrative thesis can be written *only* if the writer is willing and able to share the most intimate details of how the thinking, feeling, and acting process unfolds. Sarah was more private than we knew at the start. She dealt with feelings not by feeling them but by intellectualizing them. So when I received a draft of the thesis that was almost devoid of data (and affect), I sent it back with suggestions for data sources that had emerged in our conversations. I then received what she hoped would be the final draft. Since the draft was still skimpy on data, I pushed for more: "What happened? Tell me the story. Now, write it down. What was that like for you? How did you feel? Now, write that down."

Sarah has found, through



interviews with gay men and women, that the most important things to their healthy development as persons were supportive parents and good gay and lesbian role models. She has deepened an old friendship with a gay college instructor, and her committee member in the Northwest introduced her to two gay men with whom she is in regular correspondence. She also, after much directive prodding on my part, found her way to Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-Flag) and has taken responsibility for the Public Speaking Committee for the local chapter of the organization.

It was this step, joining P-Flag, and the final words in the writing she sent me that told me her thesis-as-development process was completed:

"I know that the issues that he is faced with are his own and that he will learn to deal with them as we all do. His issues, however, are perceived by me as a gift which has enriched me and will continue to in the circle of our lives. I used to look at Spenser and wonder what I might do to change him. Now I thank him for the change he has brought for me. No gift could be worth more."

Love and Care : The Other Dimension of Transformational Teaching-Learning

In looking back at the first experience of *revolt* in my class at Alverno, I now understand that the revolt was necessary

because I did not leave room for transformations *with* them; there was only room for transformation *for* them. Now, I spend a great deal of time with students assisting them in linking the personal, professional, and academic. Professionally, I am constantly challenged to defend this radical personal view of academic processes. "What about objectivity?" I am asked by my more traditional colleagues. "Why is it necessary to be so personal?" I also find that I need to share with the students how I perceive learning so that they can monitor their own growth and development. I have to be willing to feel and empathize as well as challenge through clear thinking. These are not skills I learned in any "how to teach college students" classes or workshops. All I can do is to make my pedagogy transparent, to share my thinking about the class and their learning experiences — a form of sharing power.

In a recent conversation with Elizabeth Jones about how my classes now seem to be on a different plane with regard to the emergence of a true learning community, she said, "I have come to be absolutely convinced that in order for true learning to take place, the students must take over the class." Now, this was my first experience of success at Alverno — a take-over that was revolutionary and somewhat, at the time, hostile in nature because I really did not have room for the students to take charge of their own learning. Still, they risked the revolution because, I think, they

sensed my caring. Now that there is room, there are transformational stories in all my classes for nearly all the students, mostly without the personal pain of an interpersonal confrontation or revolution and without the extraordinary courage it took for those early Alverno students to stand up to me, the teacher-authority. □

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