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We think differently: Lessons from multiple ways of knowing curriculum

In our work as teacher educators at an urban university, we meet new students every year who have very limited ways to think about diversity and difference. Their thinking reflects common attitudes in and around our city that devalue minorities, gays, poor people, women, and children. If we do nothing to change what our students know and believe, they will become teachers who perpetuate the current unreflective culture. Our time with the students in our teacher education program is very short and changing beliefs is usually very difficult and slow work. So we aim at showing these college students that teaching is a way of life that demands constant questioning and reflection. We hope they learn to be inquirers who continually create opportunities to study their personal questions and theories about people and the world.

These elementary education majors, in general, are pretty sure of themselves when they come into our classes. They have been successful students for fourteen years or more, and have internalized all sorts of knowledge about how school should work and how to be successful students. They are living complex lives that involve relationships, independent living, and jobs. And they are close to reaching their aspirations of becoming teachers. They are excited and eager to learn, but they are not anxious to have their thinking challenged or their basic assumptions turned upside down.

In 1996, we started talking with one another about our students' resistance to multiple perspectives and the problem of having students for only one semester and only two or three hours a week. Carlotta, a music education professor, and Cindy, an art education professor, wanted to know if Beth's experience as a language educator was significantly different from their own. While we could generate excitement and get the students engaged in assigned projects, many of our students were intent on doing them only for the grade. They wanted to give the right answers or create acceptable artworks and move on with their world-view intact.

Throughout our conversations, we realized that our teaching was contributing to the problem. We needed to "walk the talk" and provide a curriculum wherein the students learned to be reflective via multiple ways of knowing. Thus, we designed a two-semester unit that integrated the music, visual arts, and language arts methods courses, and we agreed to team teach it. We wanted to awaken the students to the "enslavement" they experienced by being unreflective and by relying on language as their sole way of knowing. We hoped the opportunity to "learn by all means" (Howard, 1992) would free the students to ask new questions and to open up to multiple ways of knowing.

On the first morning, the students were hesitant to join Carlotta when she started singing *Swing*

low, sweet chariot. She patiently worked through a call and response sequence with them and had them begin to clap in rhythm. They finally began to sing the song with her, but with reserve, not emotion or meaning. Then they sat stone-faced as Carlotta explained how this semester would be different, how the three of us—a language arts professor, an art professor, and a music professor—were going to weave sign systems and discipline knowledge together in an integrated, arts-infused study of “Enslavement versus Freedom”.

The students were then guided into small groups where they began to discuss children’s literature selections that told stories about the enslavement of African Americans during the pre-Civil War era. They read the novels **Nightjohn**, by Gary Paulsen (1993) and **Slave Dancer** by Paula Fox (1982). Their discussions of these books were punctuated with outbursts of disbelief and anger. Some students accused the authors of darkening the stories with unneeded graphic details that made the books unsuitable for use with children. Others wanted to know why they had never heard these stories in their history classes. The following exchange was recorded in one of the discussion groups:

- Student 1: I really think it is strange that I was never exposed to so many things in my school system.
- Student 2: Isn’t it? Like we never talked about slavery. Never, at least not in my school. Never.
- Student 1: And I wonder if it was just that the teachers didn’t want to teach it? Or if they did, if they would have been allowed? I wonder about that.
- Student 2: I know, I wonder why we were never taught this stuff in school?
- Student 1: Right. I know that I had basically a whole white population in my school, but I mean, we had a history class.
- Student 2: Even in high school, it was like skimming over slavery, and we went from that to the Civil War.
- Student 1: Right. A brief overview was all we got. Nothing in depth.

With Cindy, the students went on to interpret two paintings entitled, *Swing low, sweet chariot*, one by John McCrady (1937) and the other by Wil-

liam Johnson (1939). These artworks highlighted the spiritual aspects of slavery and freedom, and Carlotta had the students listen to multiple musical versions of *Swing low, sweet chariot* and talk about what they heard. They explained how the music made them feel and how it connected to slavery for them.

These initial conversations illuminated some important aspects of the students’ learning. First, their background knowledge about slavery was diverse. Some of the students had never learned any of the details of slavery. For them, slavery was a generalized concept without stories or faces. While others knew of the hardships and atrocities of slavery, they also assumed what they knew was common knowledge. They were surprised to find out that their colleagues have had different access to information about slavery in their school experiences. Secondly, the students expressed strong preferences for working in some sign systems and felt uncomfortable expressing themselves or interpreting in other sign systems. For example, about half of the students said they enjoyed interpreting the artwork together while the other half said they disliked meaning making in art.

- Student 1: I really enjoyed the art. It was interesting. I like to give my own perspective on things and not have to be wrong about it.
- Student 2: I didn’t like the art part. ... It didn’t look right to me. ... I just didn’t agree with it.
- Student 3: I like art because there was not really necessarily a right or wrong.
- Student 4: The art was the least informative, the least meshing thing that we did. I felt that I was back in art appreciation class. I felt like I was supposed to be looking for color, contrast, light and dark—those eight elements of form.

Finally, we saw that the students had very different aesthetic responses to the initial shared experiences of our curriculum. When the students listened to *Swing low, sweet chariot* sung by a group of four mature African American men called the Fairfield Four, they reflected on how the singing impacted them:

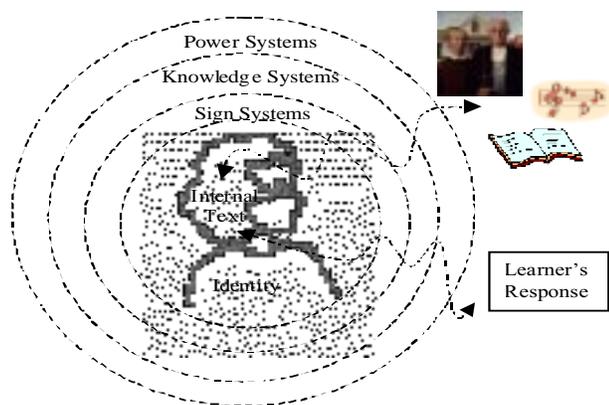
- Student 1: Listening to Fairfield Four really made me feel the pain and hope

that the slaves had in finding their freedom.

Student 2: Listening to Fairfield Four gave me powerful insight into the lives of the slaves. It gave me a visual picture of the depressing scene and how they had to struggle.

Student 3: The Fairfield Four was a group I really did not care for. The only thing that did anything for me was the way they sang. To me, that song is more a song about dying and going to heaven and how can that song be so sad? The correct meaning of it is joyous. It's a joyous song.

After just one day of teaching our multiple ways of knowing curriculum, we could see many differences among the students, and we were forced to revisit the realization that knowledge cannot be transmitted. We understood that the students' responses to the experiences of the curriculum were not indications of their intelligence or reflectiveness, but rather windows into their identities and social worlds. Based on our work with these students, we created the following model to explain multiple ways of knowing and started our journey toward understanding how we can use multiple ways of knowing to change the consciousness of students who want to become teachers.



Multiple Ways of Knowing

We put the individual learner in the center of the model because each learner has a personal identity that impacts how he or she uses sign systems and connects to information and concepts. The identity of each learner is complex and continu-

ally evolving. Learners have preferences and personal beliefs. They make sense of unique life experiences and circumstances. They are members of families, school communities, ethnic groups, gender groups, and other social groups wherein they learn to act and think in certain ways. Learners are also living in bodies that play an active role in their learning.

In addition to having unique personal identities, learners are situated within socially constructed systems that influence their meaning making. When we began to work across sign systems with the students we had to remember that they were most comfortable using the sign systems that had been valued and prevalent in their past social settings. Many of the students knew very little about the sign system of music. They did not know how to write music or even what elements to attend to when listening to music. This did not stop them from having a response to music, but it did limit how far they could go in composing or hearing the complexity in musical compositions.

Any cultural setting provides learners with varying degrees of access to different sign systems, and this impacts learning not only because learners use the sign systems they know best, but also because learners borrow concepts and ways of knowing from the sign systems used around them. It is actually impossible to separate the learner's identity from sign systems because sign systems are the basic tools used to think and share. They are both internal and external to the learner. If the learner does not have much interest in using a particular sign system or access to and knowledge of a sign system, that sign system is not a good vehicle for meaning making. Much of the potential meaning is lost when the individual interprets the signs presented. For example, the students who did not like the first day's art experience could only say that they chose not to participate in thinking about the art. They had no idea what meaning they had rejected. They just knew they did not want to think using the visual signs presented to them.

In a similar way, constructed knowledge (knowledge systems) also impacts the meaning making process. Every social context makes particular constructed knowledge available and reasonable. Schools, for example, provide access to concepts and information organized by mathematicians and scientists. Television programs provide access to images of fun and beauty created by the entertainment industry. Churches provide access to spiritual ways of knowing with historical roots,

and so forth. When our students listened to *Swing low, sweet chariot* sung by the Fairfield Four, they created different personal meanings as a result of the different prior knowledge they connected to the music. Their responses reflected their identities, and their identities reflected the different knowledge systems they drew on as learners.

Power systems are the last of the inside/outside systems in our model. Learners take their cues about their relative power from the social contexts wherein they reside. When our students responded to the experiences of the curriculum, some of them refused to consider another person's expression of meaning because it did not match their notion of a "correct" meaning. They claimed authority for knowing the right meaning from the wrong meaning, and felt empowered to reject other possibilities presented to them. These students, like the one who declared that "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" should be a joyful song, were the most challenging to work with because their stance shut down the meaning making process. Little new information penetrated their consciousness.

In addition to showing the relationship of identity and systems of knowing, this model also points out the problems of mediation. When we communicate—whether through language or visual image or music—the signs we create are just signs. They stand between us with the potential to convey the meaning expressed by the producer, but they carry no meaning with them. The meaning has to be constructed by the perceiver of the signs whose interpretations cannot be disengaged from his or her personal identity and experiences with multiple ways of knowing.

This process is further complicated by the fact that we cannot share our internal knowledge constructions, our "parallel texts" as Goodman (1996) calls them. What we experience as we interpret a text only becomes available to fellow learners when we symbolize it in concrete ways, again working through the force fields of our identity and the systems of knowing that envelop us.

As we continued our work with the teacher education students we fell into a recursive pattern of immersing the students in aesthetic experiences, both as interpreters and creators, and asking them to express what they were learning in multiple sign systems. We also deliberately broadened their access to knowledge about the sign systems of language, art, and music. As a result, many of the students began to ask questions about their own personal histories. Why did their school commu-

nities leave out important details of history? How might they move beyond painful experiences in their own lives? Whose values had they accepted without question? As a group, they became much more aware of their own diversity and its impact on them as a community of learners. While they never fully got comfortable with the fact that they did not see everything from the same perspective, they could articulate some of the reasons why the differences existed and communicate across the gap. They got beyond judging their peers as inferior or wrong to seeing them as different—socially constructed by different life experiences and contexts, having different identities and access to ways of knowing.

We feel like we are at the edge of an understanding with real potential to transform both teacher education and children's education, and we are attempting to articulate our theory. We saw literature and art and music reveal new connections and possibilities to our learners, but not in any straightforward way. The learners responded differently to experiences, and we are hoping to learn how to respond more productively to those differences. We are also admitting that our teaching cannot change identities and systems of knowing, only make learners more conscious of these forces and more aware of their own agency as learners to change themselves.

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