

Dialogue Journals and Transformational Learning: Latino Students and Their Professor “Talk-back” to Each Other

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how dialogue journals can lead to a transformative learning experience. Adult Latino students enrolled in a community college developmental reading class agree to speak truth to power through this critical writing process. Using Mezirow's (2002) transformational learning theory, Brookfield's (2000) concepts on teaching for critical thinking, and Cranton's (2000) ideas of individuation and strategy for fostering self-awareness in students, the students and professor “talk-back” to each other through dialogue journals. The complexities of discourse, culture, and individuation or resistance to it are revealed.

Keywords: Community College, Critical Reflection, Developmental Education, Dialogue Journals, Latino, Transformational Learning

INTRODUCTION

Dialogue journals are used as educational tools to incite critical thinking from kindergarten to graduate programs all around the world. It is not uncommon for adult educators to have their adult students reflect on their day-to-day thoughts and learning activities by using dialogue journals. Consequently, the hope is that students can interrogate the way they view the world and themselves. Throughout the years, as a Latina professor in the academy, I have utilized journal writing to help me critically think, deconstruct and reconstruct both my personal and academic experiences as it relates to my identity as a second generation Puerto Rican woman. Journaling has also stimulated my teaching; it has been a compass to

meaning-making an adult educator and a person deeply committed to educating Latino students. For decades I have “talked-back” to myself in my journals; it has been pivotal in the way I have found my voice and have challenged my assumptions. Through writing I have been a witness to my own life and practices. Brookfield (1995) writes, “Critically reflective teaching happens when we identify and scrutinize the assumptions that undergrid how we work” (p. xii). It was a natural conclusion that I would use dialogue journals to impel my adult Latino students to critically think on how their experiences at the community college were changing them.

For this qualitative research project I used Brookfield's (1987) definition of critical thinking: “It involves calling into question the assumptions underlying our customary, habitual

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ways of thinking and acting and then becoming ready to think and act differently on the basis of this critical questioning”(p. 1). Guiding adult learners to think reflectively means an adult educator must make a physical space, create a parenthesis of time, and allow a forum for the actual thinking to evolve; critical dialogue and transformation demand this. Mezirow (1991) suggests that “transformative learning results in new or transformed meaning schemes... when the old ones prove inadequate” (p. 60).

BACKGROUND

For almost a decade I have been teaching developmental classes, synonymously referred to as remedial courses, at the community college where I work. Semester after semester my developmental classes have been disproportionately populated by students of color, usually African-American and Latino students. These developmental classes are often taught by adjunct faculty. Alexander (2010) proposes “our current system... is a set of structural arrangements that locks a racially distinct group into a subordinate political, social, and economic position, effectively creating second-class citizenship... the system itself is structured to lock them into a subordinate position”(p. 185). My adult students are usually well aware of their placement in non-transferable courses, the classes deemed lowest on the academic spectrum, because they didn’t “test” into the college-level classes they wanted and needed. Having survived a maze of underfunded public education and minimum wage jobs, many of these adult learners have overcome immense hurdles. Attending community college is the “last chance” for a better life. Thus, the adult learners in my evening classes are focused and eager to please their Latina professor in spite of arriving to class extremely tired from their day’s work.

The evening developmental classes were congenial, but I was disconcerted that the lessons, as dictated by the skills book, did not

address the students’ aspirations of what they wanted to accomplish as adult learners. hooks writes, “In recent years we have been challenged as educators to examine the ways in which we support, either consciously or unconsciously, the existing structures of domination... we may unwittingly collude with structures of domination because of the way learning is organized at institutions (p. 45). As I deviated from the established curriculum and added more African American, Latino, and Asian-American authors into the reading list, the students enthusiastically engaged with the readings. We used these “alternative” readings to discuss unjust social structures, culture, language, and how the readings could be linked to their lives. Using authors such as Richard Wright, Malcolm X, Judith Cofer, Esmeralda Santiago, Amy Tan, Piri Thomas, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Ana Castillo and others, it made sense that they connected to authors that mediated their realities and preoccupations.

At the same time and in a twisted pedagogy of institutional-centered directives, the college was continuously restructuring the learning objectives to adhere to state standards. State standards that are always in flux create hegemonic non-dialogical structures. Faculty never really knows if they are “meeting” all the standards. Another dilemma was this: The college’s evaluation forms that students filled out near the end of the semester did not leave room for their critical reflection or feedback. Having students speaking truth to power was not on the institutional agenda.

Student feedback was solicited by the faculty the last month of the sixteen week semester. The evaluation forms are returned to the professor after the semester ended. By then it is too late to change or add anything of value to help the students. Additionally, no one knows what is done with the information when they were collected from students. Some of the questions and replies to the Student Evaluation Form include this:

- Why did you take this course?

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