

Part Three: Heart & Head

Writings rooted in a personal and more formal presentation

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A Meaningful Model for Diverse Learners

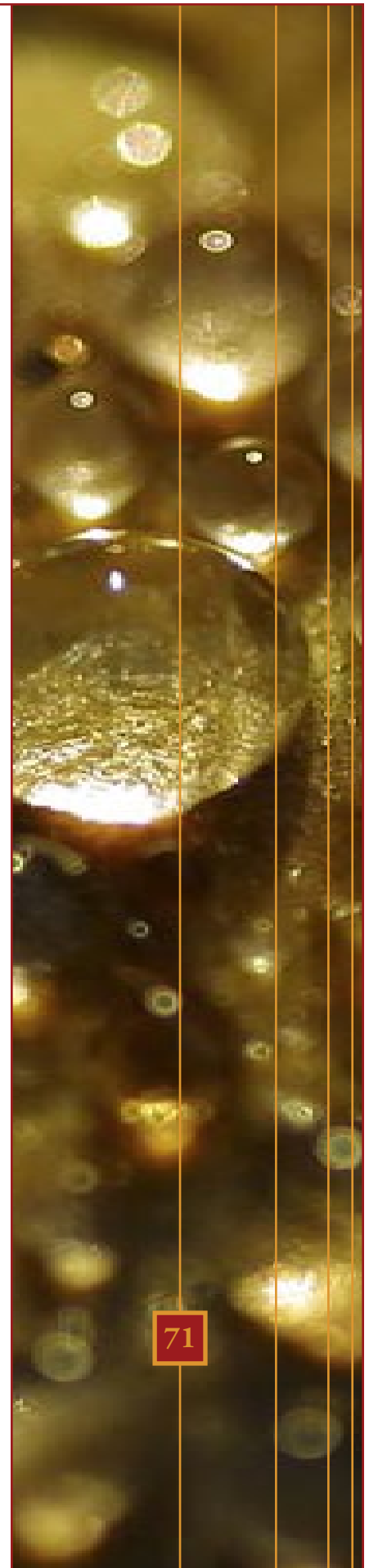
Introduction.

My first few years of teaching were a time of experimentation and learning. I started using a didactic model of teaching, consisting of lecture followed by verification lab exercises. As I observed my students, it was clear that they were not engaged in the learning process. This provided the impetus to search for better teaching models.

Through my graduate studies, membership to professional organizations, and teaching experiences which have involved diverse learners, I was introduced to alternative ways of viewing my role as a teacher and my students' role as learner. Because it is difficult to change one's methods of operation, I didn't change my teaching practices overnight. Instead, this was a slow and gradual process, involving the testing of different ideas and strategies. In many ways, it was a painful process, because the more I gave students the responsibility for their own learning, the more it felt like I was losing my "teaching authority." It took several years to feel comfortable with making the student the center of the learning experience.

As I reflected on my role as a teacher, I searched for ways to maximize the classroom climate by including instructional strategies that take into account student diversity. To meet this goal, I believe it is important to view classroom diversity in broad terms, beyond the lines of race, culture, and gender, to include traditional versus non-traditional students. According to Irvine and York (1995), specific learning styles are not unique to a given cultural group. In other words, the issue is not one of identifying a specific learning strategy for a particular ethnic group or gender, but rather to select an instructional model that fits the needs of many different students.

As a result, there are specific "big ideas" about learning that have formed my teaching philosophy and practice. For example, like John Dewey (1953), I believe students need to be actively involved in the learning process. Two ideas theorized by Jean Piaget (1952) that have had an important influence on my professional work were: (1) concrete learning experiences are the building blocks of abstract thought and (2) the process of altering one's concept is the result of assimilating or accommodating new knowledge. In addition, Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (Anderson & Adams, 1992) has influenced my classroom practice. This model includes four dimensions that progress in a clockwise direction. For example, the learner is first exposed to concrete experiences followed by the process of observing and reflecting. The learner then forms abstract concepts and generalizations, which gives rise to the application or testing of these concepts to new situations.





Therefore, it seems reasonable that effective learning models should include ways to **identify** students' "pre-concepts" and use strategies that will **promote** a re-examination of their ideas.



One other area of educational research has played a major role in framing my ideas about teaching. Studies conducted by science educators have shown that students come to class with well-developed ideas they have personally constructed about the natural world (Novak, 1983; 1987; 1993). Often these ideas are incomplete and include aspects that are not related to the current scientific understanding. I recognize the importance of identifying these misconceptions as part of the learning process to facilitate conceptual change. Therefore, it seems reasonable that effective learning models should include ways to identify students' "pre-concepts" and use strategies that will promote a re-examination of their ideas.

Identifying a Teaching Model.

Because of the beliefs I hold about teaching and learning, my professional career has centered on identifying a teaching model that is consistent with the theories of Dewey and Piaget, and one that incorporates other learning models and specific educational research. As a result, I have adopted an instructional model, known as the learning cycle (table 1). This model originated in the 1960's, but has gone through several modifications as new information about student learning has been reported (Barman, 1990).

Table 1. Components of the Learning Cycle.

Phase I - *Engagement* - In this phase, strategies are used to help students reveal their pre-concepts and misconceptions. It is important not to be judgmental of the students' ideas. All reasonable student responses should be accepted.

Phase II - *Investigation* - The students are presented with a problem or a task that is open-ended enough to encourage students to pursue a range of strategies, yet specific enough to provide some direction. The activities used in this phase provide a basis for students to question their current ideas relative to the lesson's topic and form a framework for developing new concepts and related vocabulary pertinent to the lesson topic.

Phase III - *Dialogue* - The teacher engages the students in discussion about their findings and questions based on the investigation. They are encouraged to seek additional information in multiple ways and reflect on how this process has changed their prior knowledge.

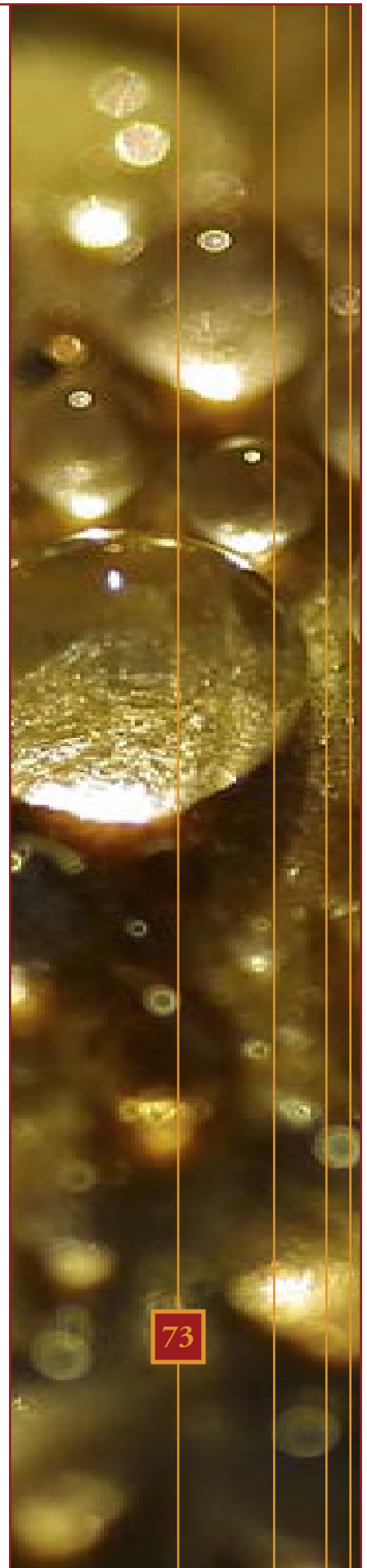
Phase IV - *Application* - The students are presented with additional examples of the main concept of the lesson or they are challenged with a new task that can be solved with information obtained during the previous phases of the lesson. Ideally, one or more of the application experiences will have a direct relationship to the everyday lives of the students. Although evaluation can occur in any of the phases, the application activities provide an excellent means of performance-based assessment.

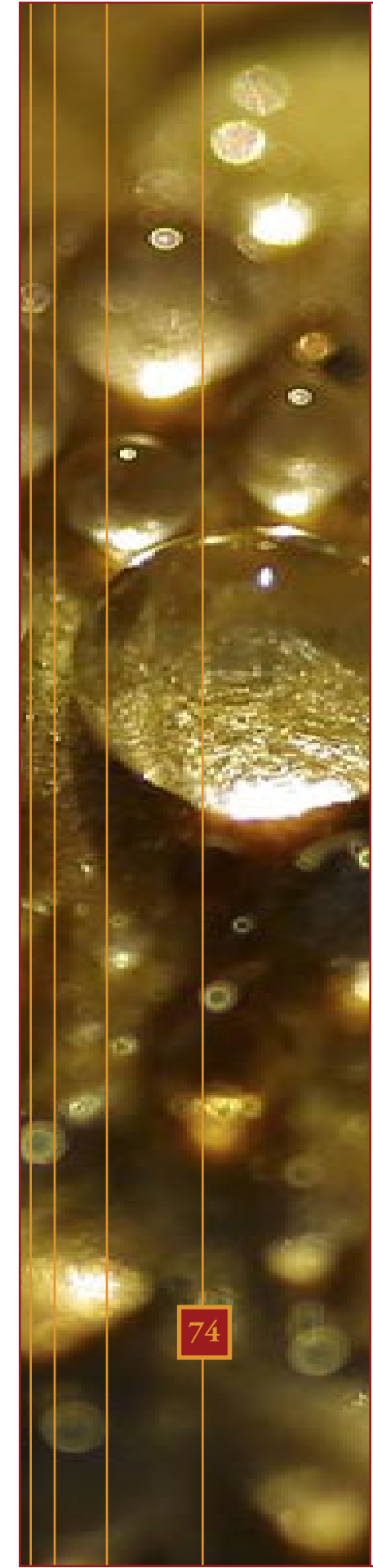
Connecting the Learning Cycle to Multicultural Education.

Because the learning cycle is a very flexible instructional model, I have found that it can also be an effective tool for students from culturally diverse backgrounds. As shown in table 1, this model follows a similar pattern to Kolb's Experiential Learning Model in that it provides concrete experiences, opportunities for observations and reflections, and the application of specific concepts to new situations.

According to Jarrett (1999), inquiry-based instruction, cooperative learning and formative assessment strategies play a key role in inclusive education. These strategies are easily incorporated into the learning cycle and they can create multiple opportunities for diverse learners to demonstrate their knowledge. For example, the active and self-directed nature of inquiry learning provides students with concrete experiences, increasing the meaningfulness of the information being learned while reducing language and literacy demands (Jarrett, 1997). Cooperative learning is considered a cornerstone of inclusive education because it can accommodate the varied abilities of students. (See Johnson, D.W., Johnson, E. and Holubec, P.R. 1984. *Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) Winzer and Mazurek (1998) have found that cooperative learning is very effective for many Native American, African American, and Latino students. In addition, formative assessment, using a variety of strategies, such as journal writing, embedded assessment, performance assessment, and concept maps, give diverse learners multiple ways to demonstrate proficiency and provides meaningful feedback to teachers about student progress (Jarrett, 1999).

As described in Table 1, the learning cycle focuses on student inquiry as part of the investigative and application phases. At this time, students can also engage in concrete experiences, including observation. The dialogue phase promotes reflection and applications to new situations take place in the application phase. In addition, the engagement, investigative, and application phases are ideal in promoting





cooperative learning and formative assessment. To demonstrate how these strategies can be incorporated into a lesson, the following example of an introductory lesson on genetics and the use of the Punnett Square is shown in table 2. In this particular lesson, guided inquiry occurs in the investigative phase, reflection takes place in the dialogue phase and cooperative learning experiences occur in the investigative, dialogue, and application phases. In addition, students apply the Punnett Square to new situations in the application phase and formative assessment occurs in all four phases of the lesson through discussion and performance-based activities.

Table 2. Sample Learning Cycle Lesson.

**The Use of the Punnett Square
Engagement.**

Hold a penny up and ask: How many times do you think I will get heads if I toss this penny 10 times? Have your students do this to verify their predictions. Collectively record their results. Discuss the outcome.

Then ask: If I toss two pennies, what are my chances of getting - two heads? - a head and a tails? - two tails? Have your students make predictions, carry out the investigation, and collectively record the results. Discuss the outcome.

Investigation.

Explain to the students that they should pretend the pennies represent a pair of alleles for the human trait of tongue rolling. Heads stand for the dominant tongue rolling gene (T) and tails stand for the recessive non-tongue rolling gene (t). One coin represents the possible genes that could be contributed by the father and the other coin represents the possible genes that could be contributed by the mother. Have your students work with a partner. One student should toss the coin designated as the father's gene contributions and the other should represent the mother's contributions. Each student is to toss the coin 10 times and determine at each toss what genes a potential offspring would have received from the mother and father.

Before they begin, have them predict what their results would be and have them justify their predictions.

Dialogue.

Have the students work in groups of four to discuss the results of and questions about their “genetic investigation.” When they complete this discussion, explain that, in the previous activity, each parent was heterozygous for the tongue rolling trait, meaning that each parent had one dominant gene and one recessive gene to contribute to the sperm or egg. This means hypothetically, that at each fertilization, the genotype would be in a $1/4:2/4:1/4$ ratio.

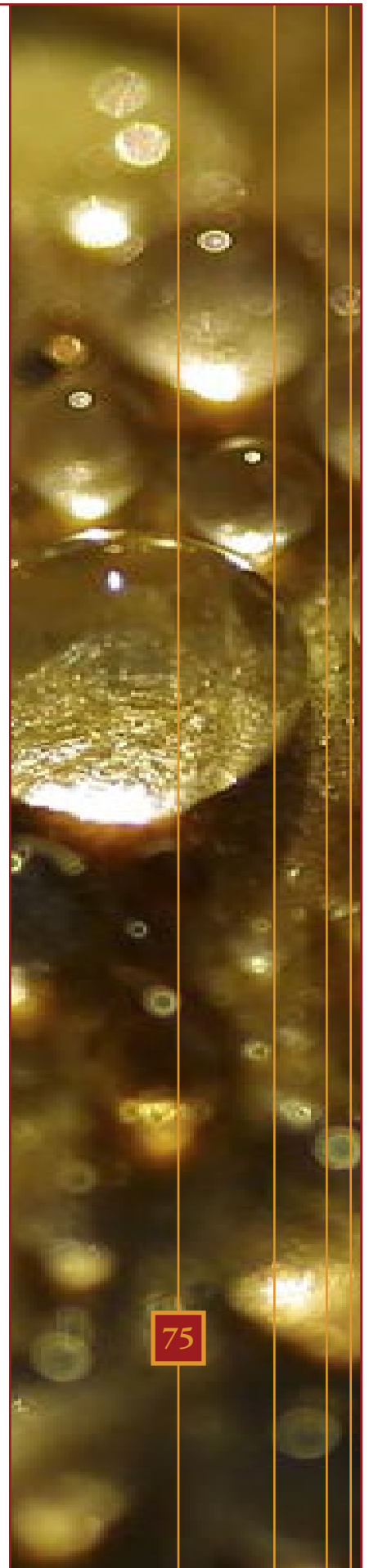
Next, introduce the Punnett Square as another way to predict the possible genotypes of the parents’ offspring. Demonstrate how a monohybrid cross between two parents heterozygous for a dominant/recessive trait can predict the possible offspring.

Application.

Arrange the students in groups of four. Provide each group with several genetics problems dealing with monohybrid crosses involving human dominant/recessive traits, such as “tasting,” “cleft chin,” and “free ear lobes.” (Make sure you explain how each of the dominant traits are manifested in the phenotype.) Have each group use a Punnett Square to determine the possible genotypes each offspring could inherit during each fertilization. Have them share their results and explain how they used the Punnett Square to solve these problems.

Summary.

As indicated above, the learning cycle is an effective way to provide students with concrete experiences, opportunities for inquiry, reflection, and observation, and ways to apply their newly gained knowledge to new situations. Due to its flexibility, the learning cycle is also an effective mechanism to promote cooperative learning and formative assessment making it a useful instructional model for diverse learners. Listed below are a few things to think about if you decide to use this approach.



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. . . change your role from direct instruction to more of a facilitator. Any change in teaching strategy requires one to become more **introspective** and **self-evaluative** of his/her teaching.

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- Any change in teaching strategy requires one to become more introspective and self-evaluative of his/her teaching. The process of change takes time and does not occur with one or two lessons.

- Students who are used to a more traditional mode of teaching may at first resist this instructional strategy. They also need time to make the transition to this approach.

- A good way to start using this approach is to select topics that you feel comfortable teaching. This makes it easier to change your role from direct instruction to more of a facilitator.

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Sharing Personal Perspective: Connecting Baby Boomers and Millennials

“I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.” (Piper, 1930)

I like you because when I tell you something special you will know it's special and you remember it a long time. You say remember when you told me something special and both of us remember.
(Stoddard Warburg, 1965)

Regardless of school level (P-16), all students bring many connections with them to the school settings. These special connections include cultures, families, friends, neighbors, and communities. From my early experiences as a student in K-16 classes, my teachers often were from generations older than my parents and from different cultures. However, these teachers possessed special skills in attentively listening to and interacting with all their students in ways to create inclusive classrooms that welcomed all students and responded to the cultures, skills, dispositions, and talents.

Reflecting upon my experiences as a kindergarten - grade16 student, former pre-kindergarten- primary classroom teacher, and college professor, I have been concerned about whether “all” school levels ask students to get ready for school, rather than to have the schools ready for the students. Therefore, this paper will (1) raise questions regarding baby boomers and millennials as co-learners, (2) highlight ways to get ready for millennials as students, and (3) offer discoveries regarding intersecting journeys of baby boomers and millennials.

Recently, I completed an intensive four-week professional development class (5.5 days plus 3 evenings per week) with individuals from varied cultures and four generations. Although this class offered an excellent curriculum, I kept thinking about the importance and impact of cultures, active engagement, teacher and student personality types (i.e., extroverts and introverts), and expectations of our collective experiences. As a baby boomer student, I was accustomed to the lecture approach to instruction, even though I do not use this approach in my teaching. However, sitting with my four generations of colleagues during the 22 days of instruction caused me to rethink my questions regarding baby boomers and millennials as co-learners. The following questions require that I remember that each millennial student and I bring a unique culture and personal history to add to and intersect with the planned and unplanned class curriculum:

1. If I were a student in our (my) class, would I feel comfortable sharing my stories with this instructor and the class? Do personal stories really have a place in creating connections between the instructor and the class?
2. Would “our” class create authentic connections between generations and cultures in terms of relevance to our individual and collective lives?
3. Would our class be intentional in responding to the various personality types and learning styles present in our class community?

Next, let’s turn our attention to highlighting ways to get ready for millennials (1982- present) as college students. From my extended experiences with students enrolled in Kindergarten- grade 12 programs, in urban and suburban school settings, I believe we must first understand the special characteristics of the millennial students. This understanding will help create the learning environments that nurture and nourish these students. However, we must be aware of the diversity within this group in terms of ethnicity, gender, economics, culture, peers, and family involvement. Millennials represent the 24/ 7 culture that regularly engages in multi-tasking, expects split-second responses to all requests, are technology savvy, and exhibits impatience with slow service.

Being a consumer means “my personal needs” must be met now or “I am entitled.” The millennial generation students have parents who are described as “helicopter parents” because of their tendency to hover over their children. They expect total involvement and participation in their daughter’s or son’s school, social, and extra curricular activities. The millennial students measure success in terms of being the best or at the top in all areas of their lives. These students lead stress-filled lives with regard to fulfilling their parents’ expectations of and dreams for them.

Given the aforementioned descriptions and needs of millennial students, who represent a diverse group regardless of geographical location or cultural background, all instructors, who are 25 plus years older than their students, must be willing to follow a simple plan. This plan would or could require that we:

1. Acknowledge and remember that each millennial student is a person first.
2. Connect with our students in the present tense.

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These students lead stress-filled lives with regard to fulfilling their parents’ expectations of and dreams for them.

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...remember that baby boomers and millennials, although from different generations, can understand the importance of building and nurturing relationships.

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3. Take advantage of the keen interest in online communication for extending time with individual students and the entire class (i.e., e-mail, chats, etc.).

4. Engage our students in interactive activities (i.e., case studies, problem based learning, etc.).

5. Use the technological shrewdness of this group to increase understanding of and appreciation for diversity with our learning community.

6. Use the “sound byte” interest spans to create increased teachable moments.

7. Ask students to join you as partners in creating a course or curriculum that responds to their questions and interests.

Following the outlined simple plan offers flexibility for all, increases success possibilities, and opens new learning opportunities.

As a member of the baby boomer generation and a university professor teaching in the Undergraduate Teacher Education Program, I am keenly aware of the difference in my age and the age of the college students, who are members of the millennial generation. With excitement, this awareness has allowed me to uncover five insights into the journeys of baby boomers and millennials. These insights intersect to allow all to grow both personally and (pre)professionally. Understanding the varied experiences of baby boomers and millennials has set the stage for these discoveries. **First**, honor and accept each generation as special and unique, as well as diverse. **Second**, identify special service learning projects that utilize the talents of both groups and connect back to the mission of our university and the goals of the university course. **Third**, share oral and written stories that highlight millennial and baby boomer cultures, individual values, and histories, thus featuring special moments that connect us on non-academic levels. **Fourth**, create spaces for listening to one another in order to learn about the generations; acknowledging the differences while finding similarities that will unite us as a community of learners. **Fifth and last**, remember that baby boomers and millennials, although from different generations, can understand the importance of building and nurturing relationships. We must place ourselves with and beside one another. Our collective group can offer support, make connections, share time, and move our “mutual agenda”

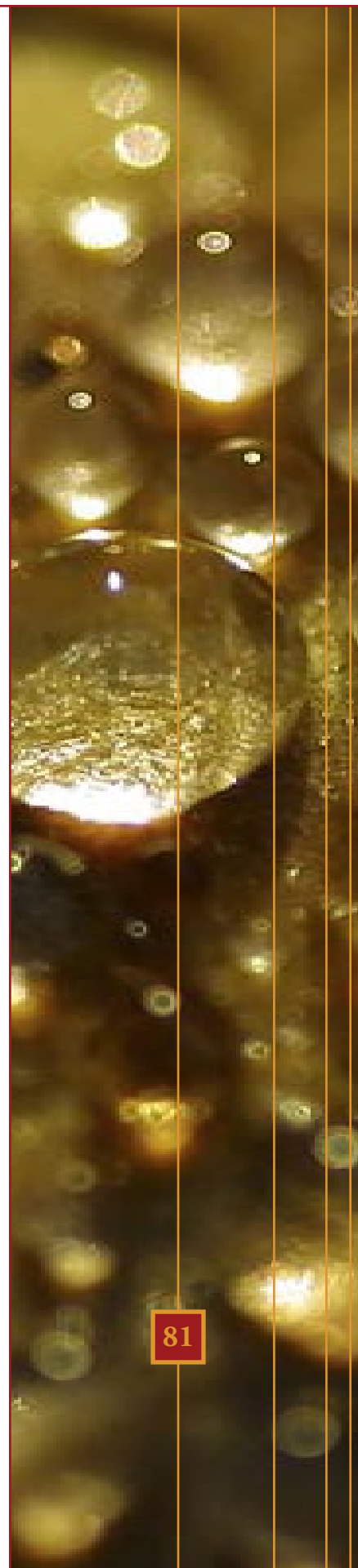
forward. Connecting with the millennial generation has reaffirmed my belief that groups of individuals can create a bold tapestry that will make a difference for both groups if we are willing to use our lenses to see a different landscape.

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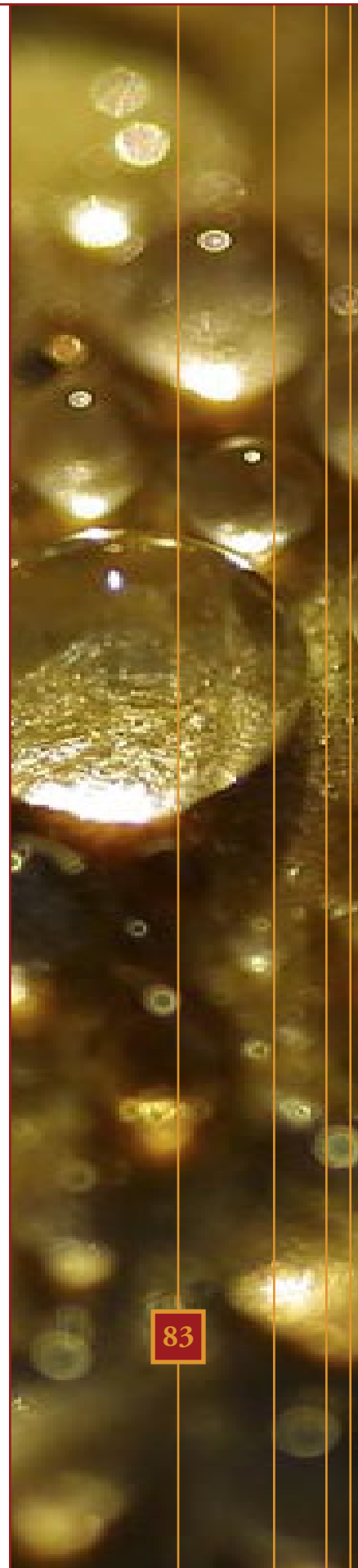
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Up the Down Staircase: Learning to Experience “Otherhood”

Foundation.

In earning my master’s in social work, I was exposed to a value system that celebrated diversity. However, there were two problems with the diversity education I received. One was that the diversity we discussed in my student years, 1975 through 1977, pertained only to racism and sexism. We did not discuss people outside the dominant culture in terms of their sexual orientation, mental and physical abilities, social class, religious backgrounds, or age, to name a few areas of marginalization. The other problem was that while we read books and articles explaining the experiences of people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, something seemed to be missing for me. The literature might have had information explaining different cultural styles, but there seemed to be no one right answer on how best to interact with people from the many diverse groups in our world. I thought I was well-prepared to relate to people from different backgrounds than my own, but once I was in the “real world,” it was not so easy. It became apparent that I had to open my mind, be sensitive and aware, and get into the world to experience people with whom I was working. I clearly had a lot to learn.

When I started teaching in the late Seventies, a few students complained about the generalizations in textbooks – generalizations implying, for example, that “all Hispanic families had submissive mothers and machismo fathers.” Other students also pointed out that, while books were written about “the African American family,” there were no books on “the Caucasian family.” These complaints surprised me; I thought I was teaching the latest and best information. Yet what they were saying rang true. The generalizations seemed to be just another way to stereotype people. Also, students from the dominant group in terms of their race, class, and sexual orientation, often expressed a lack of any knowledge about their backgrounds and heritage. Often stating “I don’t have any background,” they seemed to have an invisible membership in an unknown group. What they were expressing, I realized, is the invisibility of privilege (Kimmel, 2000). Kimmel explains that as a middle class Caucasian male, it seems as though he is without race, class, and gender. It is as though he is the “default” mode, the standard issue human being. Only when students can really feel what it is like to be the “other,” the member of the marginalized group, can they recognize the unjust power structures in our society. I finally came to realize that understanding and appreciating diversity, and comprehending the structure of society, could not be taught from a textbook. Perhaps it had more to do with the awareness of one’s perspective?





Experiential Exercise.

Reaching for a way to connect with students' deeply-held points of view, I developed an experiential exercise to lead students to a place of reflection, self-awareness and open-mindedness. Reminding them that the exercise was optional, I invited them to join by closing their eyes and reflecting on my words:

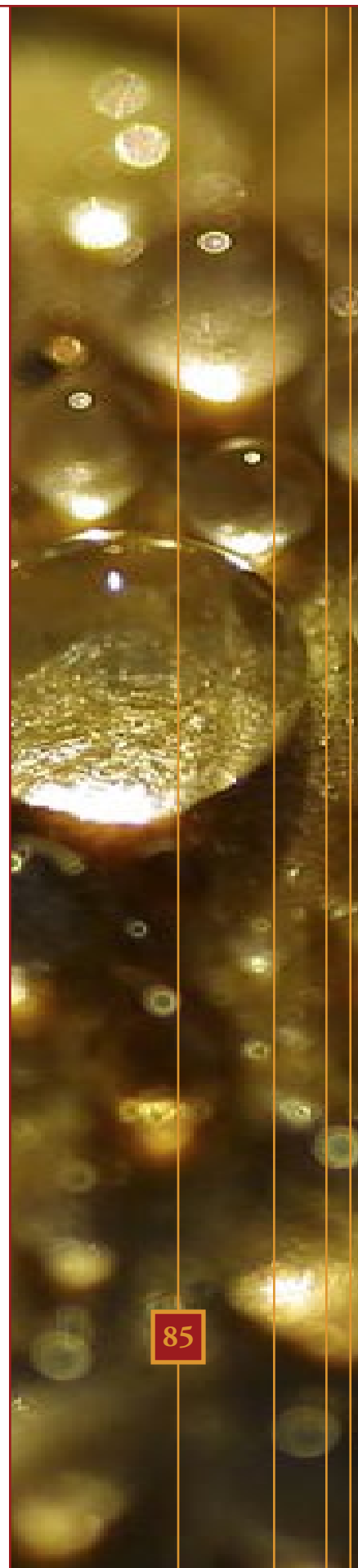
Imagine that you are exactly who you are, but the world around you has changed. As you look around your campus, you see that the vast majority of students are African American. The majority of your professors are African American. When you look at your state government, the governor and lieutenant governor are African American. The majority of people in the statehouse are African American. Looking beyond your state, to Washington, D.C., you see that the president of the United States is African American, as is the vice president. The vast majority of people in the House of Representatives and in the Senate are African American. Of the nine Supreme Court justices, eight are African American. Coming back to your community, you decide to apply for a job, and the business owners and the people taking applications are almost all African American. You decide you need a loan, and the bank tellers and loan officers are African American. You need to rent an apartment, and the landlords you meet with are African American. You drive on the highway and realize you have started to speed – sirens flash, and the police officer who comes to your car is African American. You decide to fight the ticket, so you go to court and the judge is African American. You go grocery shopping, and almost all the employees are African American. If you are not African American, you have a hard time finding hair products for yourself – you might find them under a small section marked “ethnic.” And while you are looking for that section, you might feel that people are watching you closely in the store to see if you shoplift. Take a moment more and look around this world, and just notice what you feel, what you are aware of. Then return your attention to our classroom

For the most part, students have important “a-ha” moments from this exercise. In discussing the exercise, Caucasian students often express the uncomfortable feeling of being conspicuous, or standing out. At the same time, they might express feeling somewhat invisible, that people are not really seeing them for who they are. Sometimes Caucasian students

like the feeling, or can relate it to a time when they visited a location when they were in the minority. African American students also express a variety of reactions, usually feeling safe and comfortable, or wondering what life would be like with so much power. Sometimes they feel frustrated with the reminder of how the odds are stacked against them, or empowered by considering the challenges they have overcome in life. Students from other diverse backgrounds also express a range of feelings. Occasionally, students from any background will say, “I just couldn’t get into it,” which is understandable. Being able to let yourself be carried away into a guided imagery, especially in a public setting, can be an emotional risk.

After discussing the exercise, I ask students to do it again on their own sometime, but next time imagining that the dominant group in the world is women, or gay men and lesbian women. At this point students seem ready to take in an explanation of the Dual Perspective concept. Dr. Leon Chestang (1972) created this concept to explain the two worlds experienced by a person born outside of society’s dominant group. He describes life for a typical African American boy: his family comprises the nurturing world, the world where he is known as a unique individual and is loved for who he is. This world might contain not just his family but his neighborhood, including local stores, parks, and their church. Eventually, however, he must venture outside the nurturing world, into the sustaining world – the world in which he will have to be educated, earn a living, and deal with the economic and political realities of life. In the sustaining world, he is more likely to be seen as “an African American male,” not as a unique individual. Therefore, he must develop two views of reality, that is, a dual perspective. He must constantly evaluate disappointments in life, such as not being selected for a job, as to whether they are based on his qualifications or based on racism from the dominant culture.

Students seem to understand Chestang’s dual perspective concept fairly well. The next step is to ask them to apply the same concept to someone who is gay or lesbian. If the boy in our example is gay, chances are he is born into a world that does not understand and accept him. He must then create his own nurturing world as he grows up – not an easy feat in a heterosexist society. Similarly, I invite students to apply this approach to a girl born into a family that is not female-affirming. Students can also consider social class as another area in which there are profound cultural differences, the discussion of which is almost taboo in our society. I also ask students to consider the perspectives of a child who has a disability, whether the disability is present at birth or acquired through a life-changing event. Recognizing that life is viewed differently by people in marginalized groups is an important learning experience for students. Once they have this foundation, they are more able to understand our culture as one that seeks to maintain the dominant



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I am like the fish which does not know that it is wet, because it has never known what it is like to be dry. Being **open** to new learning and growth is a challenge that I **share** with my students as we struggle to understand and live in our social world.

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group's power by objectifying the "other." We can then discuss concepts from standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1991) and Lorde's idea that there is no hierarchy of oppression (1984).

Future Growth.

While I have learned a great deal from my students and other experiences in life, I have no doubt that I still have much to learn. I am like the fish which does not know that it is wet, because it has never known what it is like to be dry. Being open to new learning and growth is a challenge that I share with my students as we struggle to understand and live in our social world.

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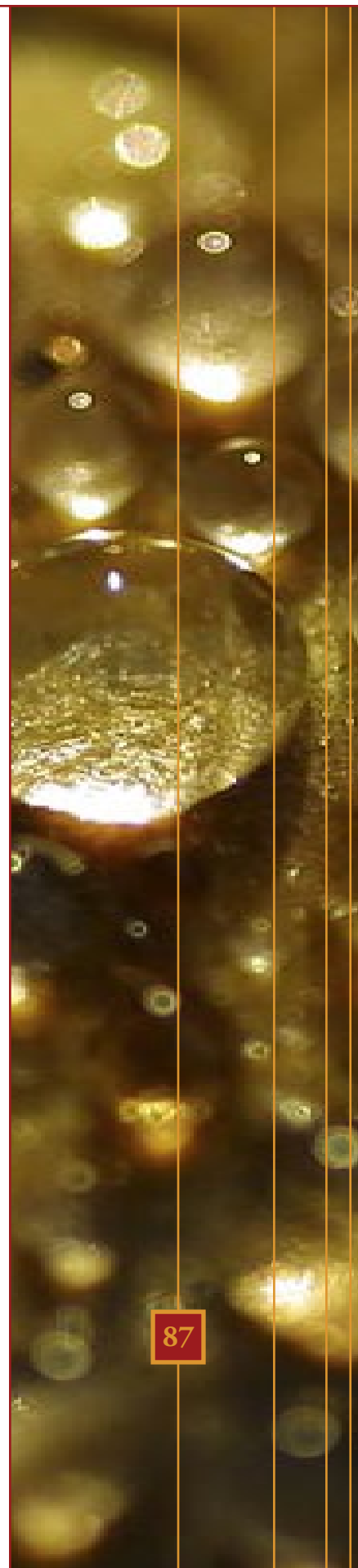
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Teaching as Transformation: An Evolving Art

My personal and professional growth toward cultural competence has been informed primarily through my teaching practice itself. Key to this growth process was my experience teaching multicultural education to pre-service teachers for two years as a graduate student. My teaching assignment increased my awareness of the multicultural issues that are part of our society, as well as the issues that instructors must grapple with in the classroom when addressing diversity directly. I came to believe and understand that effectively engaging students in issues of diversity, many of which they have never had to confront, is an art. Integral to this endeavor and teaching any course with cultural competence is bringing my students' own lived experiences into the curriculum.

The "art" for me is being able to facilitate discourse in the classroom about the complexities of diversity, as well as other issues, while being able to address student resistance to multicultural and other issues in a way that doesn't silence my students. Multicultural education is, after all, inclusion of *everyone's* cultures and voices. Talking to my education students about how they need to negotiate knowledge and the curriculum with their own students, then denying my students the opportunity to negotiate knowledge with me in my classroom is hypocritical and counterproductive to the process of transformative education. It has taken much reflective practice on my part, and recognition that effective teaching is a lifelong evolution of sorts, for me to become comfortable dealing with student resistance to multicultural issues - in particular, those concerning gender, race, class, and sexual orientation.

Early on in my experience as an instructor of multicultural education, I sometimes allowed my passion for the cause of demarginalizing the oppressed to negate the inclusion of my students' voices. As I reflected on this displaced irony, I came to realize that in order to expect my students to become truly engaged in the dialogue and "hear" the voices of the oppressed, I had to alter my tactic such that I could "hear" my students' voices. A significant element of this transition for me was acknowledging the fact that the students, like the rest of us, have to begin this journey toward cultural competence somewhere, and many of them had barely, if at all, begun. Another key component of my own personal growth in this area was learning to practice mindfulness in my communication with my students. Mindfulness, as I refer to it here, derives from the Eastern philosophical tradition and involves being present in the moment, a heightened awareness. Although I had begun mindfulness training several years prior to teaching multicultural education, I realized that I wasn't engaging in mindfulness practice much

of the time when I was teaching complex issues of diversity in the classroom. Mindful teaching affords me, and consequently my students, a more communicative environment in which to share experiences.

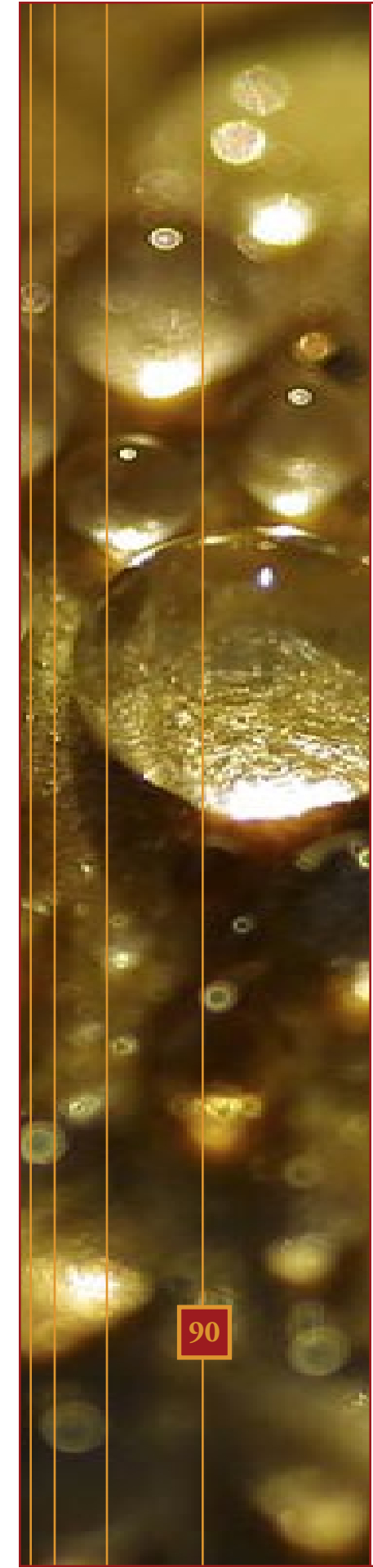
This “transformation” of my teaching tactics also becomes particularly significant when engaging my first-year students in dialogue and reflection about their service learning experiences. Students in F200, Examining the Self as Teacher, complete a predetermined number of hours in an urban school or community center, and for many this is a life-changing experience, as most of them are not from the urban. As the students develop a better understanding of diversity issues through their service learning experiences, it is imperative that they be able to express their concerns and fears, as well as their positive feelings about these experiences. In order for them to process their own journeys toward cultural competence, they need to be able to dialogue freely, and the classroom, as well as their reflection journals, provides them a forum in which to do this. Part of their process involves comparing and contrasting their own lived experiences with those of the children with whom they work at the service learning sites. This component becomes very important as my students grow to realize that in spite of the cultural, racial, and class differences, they and the children have commonalities as human beings. This helps to foster empathy for others, and debunk some of the myths that surround urban individuals.

Addressing empathy is one of the ways I bring my students’ own cultural, lived experiences into the classroom. Everyone can relate to being hurt in some way, and most have been treated unfairly at some point. An environment that welcomes their voices furthers the learning for us all; as their experiences become a part of the curriculum, they become intrinsically motivated, and they become more open to hear and learn from others. In order to convey to my students that their lived experiences are important in the classroom, I emphasize that the learning process is reciprocal; I learn from them as they learn from me - we all learn from each other. I talk with my students at the outset about the importance of bringing their lived experiences into the classroom, but I note the dangers of essentializing; what is one individual’s experience in a particular context will not necessarily be the same as another person’s in a similar context. In this way, students are more apt to appreciate the complexities of diversity through their own lives.

One of the situations in which mindful teaching has helped me “hear” more fully my students’ voices is the contradiction that many of my seniors and graduate students experience in their student teaching and their post-degree teaching jobs respectively. On the one hand, they learn in their college courses that effective teaching involves drawing upon students’ cultural backgrounds and lived experiences and implementing active, hands-on learning opportunities that are relevant to their students’

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lives. On the other hand, my students are faced with the pressure and demands of state and federal mandates that hold them accountable for their students' standardized test scores. The latter restricts teachers' autonomy to engage their students in the methodologies reflected in the former to the extent to which they believe is necessary. This situation often results in objections raised by my students to the progressive methodologies due to their incongruence with the *reality* of their teaching experiences. While the limitations my students face in their own classrooms are difficult for me to hear, especially when most of our curriculum addresses progressive and critical pedagogy, I must listen attentively and “hear” their voices and empathize with them, as otherwise I would be practicing methodology antithetical to that which I espouse. We therefore discuss both how they can attempt to meet mandates through progressive means to the extent possible, and how they might work for change in the mandates themselves that they believe to be unfair, impractical, and ill-informed.

My experiences teaching both *about* and *for* cultural competency have themselves been transformative. The “art” of raising consciousness in my students such that they don't shut down in the face of issues with which they might not be comfortable is an evolving one. I also must not “shut down”; that is, I must keep discourse going, and in order to do this, I must invite my students' lived experiences into the curriculum. *Mindfulness* practice helps me in this endeavor. This “art” to which I refer, however, is ongoing, evolving; I believe as teachers we never cease to be taken by surprise at times by students in the classroom, and it is how we address these challenges that determines whether our personal and professional growth becomes stifled or enhanced. To be *mindful* is to take each moment as it comes and be fully present; it is the essence of engagement.

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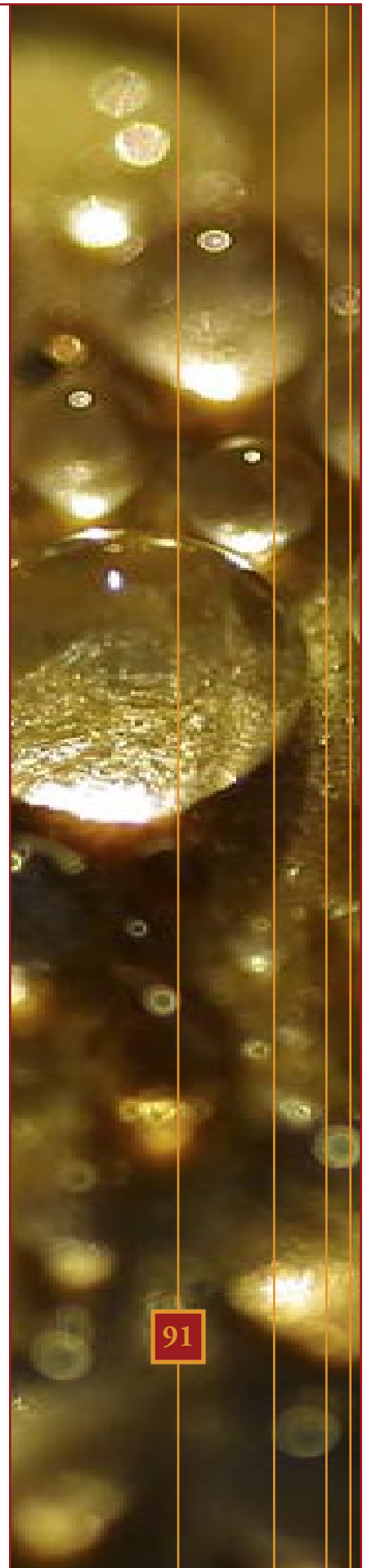
Multicultural Learning from Mis-takes

When I began my university teaching career, I did so, like many in the late 1960s, with no training and no respectable pedagogy. It was a time of cultural change, and my teaching reflected that to a degree, but I never felt I knew how to teach the subject of racial discrimination, for instance, except by looking respectfully at books like *Invisible Man*, *Soul on Ice*, or *Black Boy*. These extraordinary books worked well in many ways, but it wasn't until I began teaching autobiography and creative nonfiction workshops that I thought I'd found an approach that successfully took classes of mainly white students to a deeper understanding of racial discrimination.

One day, in the middle of the semester, I was teaching a course in autobiography with a section on difficult childhoods, and I was looking for a way to make as clear and as palpable as possible the pain involved when a child's personal identity is denied or strongly distorted by others. Since my authors represented various kinds of discrimination, I was looking for an approach that would cover race and other negative social or interpersonal responses to difference, when suddenly the obvious occurred to me: everyone has been taken wrongly at some time and suffered from it. Perhaps if students looked at their own experience in this light, it would open doors to understanding the experience of our authors. So I designed a new writing assignment in which I asked my students to think of a time when a person or an institution had got them wrong, mis-taken them in some negative way that mattered, and to tell the story of that from the inside, focusing on what it was like to be mis-taken.

The assignment went this way: Much of the energy in our first three autobiographies (Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*; Richard Wright, *Black Boy*; Mary Karr, *The Liar's Club*) comes from the tension between the writers' self-images and the views others had of them. This assignment asks you to think of a time in your life when some person or institution "got you wrong" in some way that mattered to you, and then to briefly tell the story of that event--the background, the mis-taking, and the consequences of it--in 200-300 words. The event you choose need not be earth-shaking in any objective way, just important to you at the time. Then, in a separate paragraph of about 100 words, say in what way one of our autobiographers - Frank, Wright, or Karr - seems closer to that experience than the others.

The assignment was short, but the results were very gratifying. It turned out, as I had suspected, that my students all had been mis-taken in some way that mattered. They worked hard on the assignment, and the



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results were engaged and concrete. A number of students commented that the assignment gave them a new respect for, and insight into, the dynamics of social difference.

This assignment worked, I think, for two reasons. First, its *subject* was an important part of everyone's experience, so it was easy for students to find a connection to the public issue of discrimination in their own lives, and, just as important, they felt they had the authority to tell this story. Second, the assignment's *process* involved students in writing about their own lives, which meant that more of them than usual had a stake in getting things right. And in that labor they had a relatively clear criterion - truth to an experience they knew from the inside - against which they could test what they had written, and judge when it was good enough that they were finished. Because of these things, I believe - energy, authority, and clear standards - the written results had little of the lazy abstractness or lack of intellectual drive that can plague undergraduate work. My students took to the assignment and worked hard to make it right.

Writing in a focused way about their own experiences brings these same particular energies and concrete criteria to creative nonfiction workshops. After having taught both fiction and nonfiction workshops for many years, I came to believe that my students naturally learned more in nonfiction workshops, for the same reasons: Students care about the assignments in a primary way, and they also have a built-in feedback from the criterion that tells them they need to keep at it, until it tells them they are done.

When students write about their own lives in a focused way, they do a great deal more than write down things that happened or that they thought. They learn, and they can learn a great deal because at the heart of their subject is an experience that is real to them. They may not understand it completely, but working toward a better understanding by crafting the story of it is an exercise that is disciplined at every point.

There are very few courses in which there is not a good place for a short nonfiction assignment that would involve exploration of a course-related idea through self-reflection and development, with the insight and energy that come from the personal stake and the authoritative stance of the autobiographical writer.

I know that many instructors are reluctant to incorporate autobiographical writing into their courses because they are concerned that the subjectivity of the assignment would lead to lazy or irrelevant work, or that it might generate an intimacy that would be inappropriate or embarrassing in the classroom setting. These are good things to be concerned about - and autobiographical writing is very different from

expository writing we usually assign. However, instructors can avoid these problems by specifying the assignment's range and its tone. The writing will naturally be about personal experience, but the intimacies can be contained or focused by the assignment's briefness and by its reference to external documents and issues. Thus framed, the intimacy that emerges will tend to be more intellectual than personal. And certainly the development of an intimate relation to one's intellect is one of the finer goals of higher education.

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