



Democratizing Education: Moving from Discomfort to Action

by Scott R. Meyer, Leo R. Sandy and Krisan Evenson

This article first appeared in Vol. 21 of The International Journal of Learner Diversity and Identities in 2014.

Introduction

This paper represents an integration of personal experience, research and application as it pertains to teaching and the growth and development of both students and teachers. It reflects the teaching experience of the three authors, and its positions and conclusions may not be applicable to all teachers, classrooms and cultural contexts. For the purposes of this article, we work within the cultural context of the United States. Since it is difficult to separate experience, research and application from the topic of pedagogy, we have employed an integrated approach to examine the need for the creation of safe spaces for classroom dialogue and the ensuing conflict that it can generate.

Democratic Educational Practice within a Sociopolitical Culture

The Institute for Democratic Education in America defined democratic education as “learning that equips every human being to participate fully in a healthy democracy...The goal of democratic education is to empower young people to be autonomous, responsible members of

their community and the larger world. Democratic education is rooted in meaningful challenge to the learner, while also being responsive and relevant to the larger community. It celebrates the adventure of learning, while cultivating personal and social responsibility. It helps individuals and communities find their voices... Democratic education incorporates the principles of a healthy democracy: students have an active role in shaping their own learning, rather than being passive recipients of knowledge. They are participants and citizens, each with unique gifts, not empty vessels or products on an assembly line” (Institute).

So, it is imperative for teachers to assure that students understand the necessity for respectful disagreement in order to best promote intellectual growth.

Thus, in giving students a voice, democratic education is one in which dialogue must be promoted and feelings accommodated through “strategic empathy” (Zembylas, 2012). As a result of such dialogue and the feelings that accompany it, more voices are heard and differences in perspectives occur. Through the authors’ combined classroom experiences in public and private institutions of higher learning, it appears that conflict is a common product of open dialogue. But, we contend, conflict is less often a vehicle of open dialogue leading to social action. Conflict in this context can refer to that which is internal and external. In the former, students may experience discomfort or cognitive dissonance when their beliefs are challenged and their feelings are triggered. External conflict can occur when discussions become heated due to the clash of ideas and cherished beliefs. So, it is imperative for teachers to assure that students understand the necessity for respectful disagreement in order to best promote intellectual growth. Teachers themselves have to learn to become comfortable with conflict and enter the fray as learners: they must model the behavior they seek to promote. As an example of building the safe spaces in which such conflict can productively exist, the following note is included in one of our classes’ syllabus and discussed in class at the beginning of the course:

Note on Teaching and Learning

In this course, controversial material will be presented and discussed. This often creates discomfort and conflict from which escape is often sought through silence, or uncritical dismissal. However, such dissonance provides the conditions within which change and growth can occur. Thus, it is important to critically examine ideas and opinions among students and between students and teachers. If a student’s or teacher’s ideas are not challenged in a respectful manner, then it will be difficult for either student or teacher to change their views when such change may be warranted. According to Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, “The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and reconsiders her earlier considerations as the students express their own”. Critical thinking, problem posing and problem solving can only exist within the context of civil dialogue and in an environment where all participants have a sense of safety. Further, material in this course, in some instances, may be sensitive or emotionally provocative. As you review the syllabus, or at any time during the course, please let us know if you anticipate, or are having, a problem with any assignment or classroom activity. We can then discuss how this assignment or activity is necessary for meeting

course competencies and whether an alternative assignment or activity can be considered. We can also discuss campus resources that you may find helpful in dealing with your concerns.

Traditionally, in the U.S., and perhaps in many other countries, conflict is something that people seem to go out of their way to avoid because they are not prepared to resolve it based on a lack of experience, training, and cultural standards. This may be particularly true for marginalized students who have learned to suppress their voices and of course is of concern in an age where increased anxiety can have mental health implications on our campuses. This also may be common in countries with authoritarian rule where raising conflict can be life threatening. Thus, conflict has the potential to be the great preserver of democracy because it illustrates the critical importance of freedom on intellectual and physical levels. However, the socialization of students to support the status quo is antithetical to democracy. Disturbance of the classroom peace may upset the otherwise orderly system that is trying to be preserved out of habit or tradition. Pedagogically speaking, conflict must be raised at times in democratic education to delve into issues that generate multiple and opposing perspectives. The very existence of conflict suggests that there are many ways to read the world. The presence of conflict would be a good thing in and of itself to process with students in terms of why and how such different points of view have emerged. It has been said by some that in the United States people love violence and hate conflict. This may also relate to the devotion to the absolute and the fear of the relative, as Reverend William Sloan Coffin indicated when he stated that, “All of us tend to hold certainty dearer than truth” (Coffin, 1996). Behind every violent act is a perception of rightness while conflict raises questions of established beliefs. Perhaps if there were more acceptance of and ways of resolving conflict peacefully, there would be less violence.

Before entering school, youth are introduced to what appears to be an unwritten rule that may apply to many families in the U.S. and that is not to discuss religion or politics at family gatherings. The assumption of this rule is that family harmony is more important than an exchange of ideas because such an exchange could lead to strong emotions and discord that can undermine relationships. Thus, the socialization process within families sometimes promotes the idea that some things are better left unsaid. It seems that this rule may have come about because people are not taught the skills to discuss controversial views without violating major cultural norms. If one is not able to express disagreement in a socially acceptable manner, the alternatives could be a loss of emotional control or suppressed anger. Sacrificed in this process is an exploration as to how beliefs have come about and ultimately change. Since schools assume the role of *in loco parentis*, this issue easily extends into the classroom, especially in secondary and postsecondary educational institutions. According to Welch (2008), “we need ongoing cultural and institutional mechanisms for engaging conflict equitably and creatively...(and that) conflict is a normal part of individual and social relationships (and) often a motor for change” (p. 58).

One primary obstacle for the kind of change that ultimately leads to peace and social justice is the way that many schools have commonly been structured. With an increasing number of exceptions, schools haven't changed a great deal since the Industrial Revolution. Most still have grades K-12, use letter grades and teach subjects with little or no connection to each other. Many classrooms are arranged with desks in straight rows, and the governance process is top down with very little shared decision-making by teachers, parents and students. Often, parents like their schools the way they are and resist attempts to change them based on the reasoning that the

structure of the schools they attended was good enough for them. As an aside, one coauthor has noted that first-year college students sometimes allow their grades to fall – particularly in first-generation college students – in order to maintain fidelity with their home culture. This may be especially relevant in courses where worldviews are challenged. Cognitive dissonance is an important contributor both to students' decision to attend college (to meet expectations of parents) and then also to their decision to leave college after the first year (to return to a more comfortable home culture). Left unexamined (by them, and by us), we lose the valuable but undeveloped human capital for our country and the world. Despite these risks to educational retention, the potential benefits of conflict are great.

Preparing students for a university education is paramount. But the American elementary and secondary school system exists in a sociopolitical culture that generally values conformity, passivity, obedience and rote learning. It is no accident that legislation such as No Child Left Behind is strong on assessment and weak on instruction, that recess as an outlet for pent up energy and a vehicle for social development is being eliminated in favor of time on task based on the business model of education and that children are dropping out of school at high rates, particularly in minority and low income areas. Linda McNeil (1988) noted this in her work on social control and education, and William Ayers (1988) also captured this problem well by making a distinction between education and schooling:

education is about opening doors, opening minds, opening possibilities. School is too often about sorting and punishing, grading and ranking and certifying. Education is unconditional – it asks nothing in return. School routinely demands obedience and conformity as a precondition to attendance. Education is surprising and unruly, while the first and fundamental law of school is to follow orders. Education frees the mind, while schooling bureaucratizes the brain. An educator unleashes the unpredictable, while a schoolteacher sometimes starts with an unhealthy obsession with a commitment to classroom management and linear lesson plans...But, to embrace discomfort and ambiguity, of course, requires courage – courage to tolerate emotional uncertainty and courage to open up intellectually to find connections with people around the world (Zembylas and Boler, 2002, pp. 16 & 23).

Given these distinctions, our own experience with college students is that too many of them tend to be passive, acquiescent, silent and emotionally neutral, especially during the first year of college. They listen attentively but they may not feel safe enough to express opposing views. This may be because they are the products of their families and “schooling” rather than education. In addition, many are more sensitive to peer messages than those of authority figures in what Merelman (1986) has called ‘lateral socialization.’ That is, students may resist authority in favor of peer engagement, even as they worry more about their reputation among peers. When asked about why they may not be forthcoming in oral participation in class, many students say that they are more concerned about peer views of their performance than their teacher’s view.

But the values students bring with them are assimilated from their experiences rather than critically analyzed. Regardless of their position on the political values spectrum, students may arrive in our classrooms with a group identity (e.g., liberal, conservative, “Republican,” “Democrat,” “Independent,” “Libertarian”, etc), but be unclear about why they have done so, or

unable to speak to particular issues or problems using the purported beliefs of their assimilated identity. The adoption of liberal or conservative views without critical analysis is our concern here rather than students' political orientation per se. As Marcia noted quite early (1966), such an identity must be achieved via an identity crisis in order to express fully its inherent action/implication. An acceptance of conflict by those with an achieved identity rather than an assimilated one promotes productive problem-solving and conflict resolution. According to Kroger and Marcia (2009) "because of their difficulty in considering alternatives seriously, they must maintain their stances defensively and either deny or distort disconfirming information. If their values are generally mainstream and they stay within social contexts supporting those values, they appear 'happy,' 'well-adjusted', loving their families and their families loving them" (p. 35). It is also important to note that the parents of identity achievers are much more likely to accept conflict than the parents of those with "foreclosed" identities who use emotional blackmail to get their children to adopt their values and beliefs without question. Thus, those with foreclosed identities do not experience an identity crisis or conflict and may become clones of their parents. It is also interesting that the foreclosed status is the one with the lowest level of anxiety indicative of freedom from conflict. Another aspect of foreclosure has been offered by Freedman and Schuler (2002) who asserted that "students are becoming part of a consumer culture and constructing their individual identities with little critical reflection" (p. 19). Students with foreclosed identities may resist changes to this identity. In therapeutic environments, professionals have determined that change must be introduced very slowly to avoid overwhelming these "foreclosed identity" clients with anxiety. (Marcia, 1986) The pedagogy of discomfort should be used with the same care in the classroom, to minimize resistance by some who are more comfortable with familiar modes of instruction.

Crucially, then, we must structure the educational experiences of children and young adults to promote full human development. Classroom environments that greet conflict in an open, honest and safe manner best actualize human potential.

The Value of Conflict in Transforming Student Thinking and Behavior

The "pedagogy of comfort" (Knight-Diop & Oesterreich, 2009) occurs in an atmosphere of shared belief systems that are perceived as essentially cast in stone and not subject to question. For students, this means viewing the world as a collection of facts to be learned. The truth does not need to be pursued because it appears to already exist, especially with "culturally correct" assumptions that include stereotypical beliefs, sanitized views of historical events, and victim blaming. Alternative points of view need not be introduced because they just upset people. Here are just a few examples.

First, many social studies texts are so sanitized that students only get a highly romanticized view of American history as a series of military victories (or, rationalized defeats) and conflicts already resolved. They learn about many war heroes but not about peace heroes. According to Lucey & Laney (2009), "traditional pedagogies, such as the image-of-greatness approach, may do a good job in imparting our cultural heritage, but may be deficient in teaching children how to think for themselves and how to translate thought into action" (p. 261). Scholars of political culture also have long recognized the value of national versus condensation symbols (see

Edelman, 1985). National symbols (flags, anthems) serve to unify the public, while condensation symbols (burning crosses, or sneakers over power lines) refer to subsets of a population and figure only as aberrations in a unified national story.

Conversely, cognitive conflict in the classroom can open minds and provide ways for long held ideas and beliefs to be looked at in a new light.

Second, students also often don't get a Native American view of westward expansion. In addition, everyone is probably familiar with General and subsequent President George Washington but few may have heard of Rachel Carson. According to Stromquist (2009), "The curriculum tends to present the world devoid of conflict, and to portray one's country in a righteous way—approximating what Plato called "noble lies" (p. 20). Ignorance can indeed be blissful. As Loewen (1995) also noted, "...the teaching of history, more than any other discipline, is dominated by textbooks... the books are boring... [they] exclude conflict or real suspense. They leave out anything that might reflect badly upon our national character" (13).

Conversely, cognitive conflict in the classroom can open minds and provide ways for long held ideas and beliefs to be looked at in a new light. This pedagogy of discomfort creates cognitive dissonance which involves the coexistence of conflicting beliefs and feelings of uneasiness. To resolve this uneasiness, students must either begin to engage in critical thinking and to examine evidence relative to the opposing issues, or cling to their original beliefs. When cognitive restructuring has occurred, students view the opposing sides in less absolute ways. Previously held assumptions do not look the same anymore. Since the teacher practicing a pedagogy of discomfort sees him or herself as a learner, s/he will *also* experience cognitive restructuring because students provide new material. Those who cling to their original beliefs do not experience this cognitive restructuring, and their identity development may be arrested.

Because we are introducing cognitive dissonance and its attendant uneasiness, we can not discount the role of emotion inherent in a pedagogy of discomfort. While citing Arundhati Roy, Zembylas and Boler (2002) noted, "a pedagogy of discomfort situates itself within a post-structuralist and feminist tradition that recognizes emotions as discursive practices that constitute one's subjectivities. As an approach to media analyses, a pedagogy of discomfort particularly emphasizes a critical inquiry that recognizes "how emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see" (p. 18)... This kind of inquiry requires that educators and students learn to trace how one's subjectivities are shifting and contingent. The emotions that often arise in the process of inhabiting various senses of self are defensive anger, fear of change, and fears of losing one's personal and cultural identities. A pedagogy of discomfort entails creating spaces for epistemological and emotional problematizations of individual and collective emotions, histories, and sense of self. One result of this interaction is that such a shared struggle encourages classroom bonding, empathy and partnerships in problem-solving. What was once rote-learning has become a kind of Robber's Cave Experiment (Sherif et. al., 1954/61) wherein a superordinate goal unites erstwhile contending parties. Greater feats are achieved when we work together, as democracy can demonstrate (but may not – *currently*).

The classroom provides two main opportunities to experience cognitive conflict. The first is through course content or what Jansen (2009) referred to as “troubled knowledge” and the second is how that content is delivered – the pedagogical aspect. In one of our interdisciplinary courses, *Building a Civil Society*, we present many controversial topics in the form of essential questions such as Do you think you personally can change the world? What makes that possible?... Why is there so much conflict when brain research shows we are hard-wired with an instinct for empathy? Why is civility a threat? How does religion promote and retard civil society?; How does the U.S. prison system impact civil society?; What are the main causes of violence?; How is ecoliteracy/ecojustice related to civil society?; and What are human (and animal) rights, and what is their importance for civil society? Furnished articles present opposing views of the topic at hand.

The pedagogical aspect of the course involves opening weekly discussions with written responses to questions, reflection papers. Students also do group presentations on essential course questions and present opposing viewpoints on the topics at hand. Also, as instructors, we may start a discussion by the comment, “Some people say that...What do you think and why do you think that way?” For example, one statement related to corporal punishment that we use is, “Some people say that they were spanked as a child and they turned out okay. What are your thoughts on that? Oftentimes these questions are first processed in small groups before they are discussed with the class as a whole. On one occasion, a student said that her parents only hit her once and their relationship was changed negatively from that point on. Another said that she (was also spanked and) deserved it and holds no bad feelings toward her parents for spanking her. Then we discuss how such different points of view can occur. In a class offered at a prison, one inmate said that he agreed with this spanking statement. He felt that he turned out okay after being spanked as a child. At that point, another inmate pointed exclaimed, “For Christ’s sake, you’re in jail!”

Cognitive conflict may cause some students to become more resistant to changing their views. One student in our *Philosophical Perspectives on War and Peace* course was initially very confrontational toward the instructors at the beginning of the course. After a while, he stopped talking in class. When asked about this, he said that he did not like the other students disagreeing with him so that it was easier just to remain silent. He seemed less concerned about the instructor’s responses to his comments than he was about his peers’ responses. This is not atypical – many students assume that professors are the *only* people permitted to question their views. When reminded about the importance of discussing opposing views, he merely nodded and only spoke when called on. However, he did find common ground on many areas and voiced these when asked for his opinion directly. He appeared to be coming to terms with his own absolute beliefs and to want to show that he was not stereotypical in his beliefs.

These experiences indicate that the pedagogy of discomfort can have mixed results. Zemblayas (2011) relayed some concerns about the use of a pedagogy of discomfort. These concerns relate to the ethical dimensions, specifically the “collateral effects” that arise from Jansen’s (2009) “troubled knowledge” (e.g., raising issues surrounding apartheid in South Africa also brought up disturbing reminders of events differently experienced by members of a society). Zemblayas also mentioned the practical consequences of discomfort when used with different cultural groups. In the U.S. context, this may be akin to raising issues of racism, slavery, or white privilege.

Other “collateral effects” might be experienced in the mental health of students. In 2011, the National Survey of Counseling Center Directors (Gallagher, 2011) reported that 27% of students screened for anxiety were referred for internal (to the campus) or external (off-campus) treatment. The surveyed counseling center directors noted a tremendous increase in those seeking or needing their services in the period 1994-2011 (Gallagher, 2011: 4)[1]. While there is no causal link between a pedagogy of discomfort and mental illness, the existence of mental illness may be exacerbated by the presence or introduction of ‘troubled knowledge.’ The resulting dissonance experienced by those with foreclosed identities heightens the risk for anxiety disorders.

A pedagogy of discomfort is not a magic solution for bringing about higher levels of thinking and awareness because students vary in their ability to tolerate cognitive conflict or even ambiguity. Some don’t want any; others like some; and still others thrive on a lot of it. To withhold cognitive conflict from the classroom because some students may be negatively impacted may result in a lost opportunity for so many more students who will benefit. For teachers, of course it is easier to lecture and give tests and that may spare some students discomfort; but if more teachers were comfortable with having their own views challenged, they could provide a more stimulating experience for their students. Teacher preparation programs should pursue this issue since a “pedagogy of discomfort still remains a powerful pedagogical tool able to produce action, because teachers and students can utilize their discomfort to construct new emotional understandings into ways of living *with* others—the ultimate vision of this pedagogy, in my view” (Zymbaylas, 2011).

There are many public school teachers who would eagerly rise to the occasion and provide students with more intellectual stimulation if the policy environment allowed them to do so. If educators at the public school level had academic freedom and were able to “bust bubbles and plant seeds,” there would be a greater opportunity for students to learn to think critically and to suspend snap judgments on what they have been and are being taught by the time they reach college. It would not only create a healthy skepticism and openness to new ideas and challenges to established knowledge but also develop the kind of citizens capable of producing new knowledge. However, “the teachers fear criticism and litigation if they deal with topics considered controversial or political in nature” (Stromquist, 2009, p. 20). Stromquist (2009) also reported that “social studies classes are characterized by (a) memorization rather than active learning, and (b) exposure to material with limited diversity of values, opinions, and interests of citizens (and)... that in general there is very little education that proposes transformational social visions in U.S. schools at present” (p. 21).

While this problem may begin in elementary and secondary education, it does not end there. Higher education is also affected despite greater academic freedom available to professors. According to Targ (2008), “most universities in the United States gave lip service to academic freedom...During periods of controversy and conflict in society at large, universities become ‘contested terrain’. That is, external pressures on universities lead administrators to act in ways to stifle controversy and dissent.” For example, Lynne Cheney’s and Joseph Lieberman’s American Council of Trustees and Alumni condemned universities as weak links following September 11 and accused faculty of using tolerance and diversity to avoid responsibility for distinguishing between good and evil. This group even compiled a list of

faculty members they believed were not acting in the best interests of the United States (Meyer and Sandy, 2004). The problem with this kind of thinking is that it suppresses dissent and critical thinking which are essential for the preservation and advancement of a democratic society. Academic freedom is the lifeblood of a free society. On the other hand, after the Abu Ghraib prison scandal involving allegations of torture by US personnel in Iraq, the American Psychological Association (2009) declared its public position that torture is 'indefensible', in contravention of its mission to promote inquiry and the scientific method. These two institutions demonstrate that dissent is barely viable in times of national crisis and that critical thinking and scientific inquiry must be promoted in our colleges and universities where we foster our greatest promise for a new generation of problem solvers.

By contrast, in totalitarian societies, teachers who are independent thinkers are often the first to be persecuted because sociopolitical literacy is a threat to authoritarianism and its concentrated power and control. Cognitive conflict is the mechanism by which higher level thinking occurs, and social action is often a product of that thinking. Ultimately, we create civically engaged citizens who strive to enrich the quality of life in their communities, countries and the greater world. Because they have expanded perspectives, such people think and act in ways that advance human development inevitably leading to social justice and world peace.

Such pro-social action requires germination time. In fact, one of the problems with cognitive restructuring is that it involves maturational or progressive growth. Thus, it takes time to take effect. While there are few studies showing the impact of cognitive conflict and cognitive restructuring on behavior, there are some case examples that show promise in this regard. Kapitulik, Kelly, & Clawson (2007) taught a course in which students got directly involved in activism to restore budget cuts to the University of Massachusetts. They acknowledge this frequent lack of immediate results by stating that "we hope that our efforts have planted the seeds of awareness and empowerment, the fruits of which may not be seen for years. In the end, we were encouraged by what we saw, heard and experienced... While we were certainly surprised that more than one student said that this course inspired them to become professional politicians, lobbyists, and lawyers, we were equally pleased with the students who said they planned on making even more modest commitments. These included paying closer attention to local news and voting in state and federal elections. As we see it, any step toward greater participation in the political process is a good first step" (pp. 144-147). Blake and Ooten (2008) showcased their co-taught course, Gender, Race, and Activism, for first-year students. The capstone assignment was a social justice action project and literature review. The students worked with the mother of a murdered student and collected 2000 signatures on petitions for increased penalties for stalking in Virginia. They also received television coverage and continued to collect signatures after the class was over as well as to make plans to take the petitions to the state legislature.

Revilla (2004), in her longitudinal study, showed the reciprocal relationship among dialogue, conflict and activism. She found that as marginalized students

learn how to negotiate both privilege and oppression in the college setting, they develop tools for understanding their conditions. These tools are political and social consciousness, which are

often internalized and acted upon in the form of student activism. This research further indicates that student activism has a direct effect on these students' retention at their universities. It is through involvement in on and off-campus student organizations, that these marginalized students create meaning of their education. In their efforts to accomplish their goals or visions of social justice, these students develop intimate connections between their education and their lives. As students gain critical consciousness on multiple levels, (including but not limited to race, class, gender, sexuality, spirituality,) they gain a more inclusive sense of activism and build necessary coalitions for their efforts. They become agents of social change on their campus and in their communities, as is exemplified in the case study of Raza Womyn de UCLA (pp.80-95).

We may conclude that based on these preliminary examinations, a pedagogy of discomfort both promotes a democratization of education and serves as an essential building block to promote student activism. Aside from our own experiences, supporting this conclusion is the work of Long (2008) who taught a college course on The History of Modern Wars designed to help "students learn that there have been no good American wars, that the country has never come at all close to living up to the values it professes (attacking rather than defending democracy and self-determination), and, thus, that there is really little new about the current American aggressions in Afghanistan and Iraq" (p.68). Long (2008) collected exit opinion surveys of his course which found that his students did become more critical of American wars but did not have reason to believe that they would necessarily engage in anti-war activism. To that end, he insightfully proposed the need for teachers to provide role models of resistance leaders and activists and specific tools of activism. As we earlier noted, teachers must model the behavior they seek to promote, but may be constrained by their institutional policies and norms. Clearly, presenting these issues in Long's class raised cognitive conflict but also suggested the need to connect with others who are committed to promoting social change. Such organizations could include Veterans for Peace, Inc., Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Habitat for Humanity, and Invisible Children. Thus, a pedagogy of discomfort is an important component of change agency. However, alone it may be an insufficient condition for the transformation of cognitive conflict into action. The knowledge, values and skills requisite for effective social change must also accompany a pedagogy of discomfort. The successful examples cited above demonstrate that students can move beyond passivity, anger, frustration, complaining and a sense of hopelessness about their ability to effect change.

Obstacles to a Pedagogy of Discomfort

When asked individually, many students report that they are not used to talking in class and yet, according to the course evaluations, they enjoy dialogue even when only a few students are engaged in it. It's as if the vicarious experience were itself intellectually stimulating and perhaps a catalyst for the next step to their class participation and social action based on new-found awareness. Students in our classes have said, "We were never allowed to talk about any of the things in high school that we talk about in this class". This type of secondary school experience is in stark contrast to Paulo Freire's (1995) role of the teacher: "the problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students – no longer docile listeners – are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and reconsiders her earlier considerations as the students express their own" (pp. 61-62).

Another student, gently chided for talking with a neighbor during a student group presentation, said that she didn't agree with most of the things said in class anyway. When asked to be specific about what she disagreed with and to present alternative opinions that could serve to change the opinions of others, including her instructors, she did not respond. It is quite common for students to automatically reject opposing views but not be able to defend ones with which they agree. New ideas and perspectives are often summarily dismissed mirroring media treatment of political issues but also causing a serious threat to education. In his work with college students, Hostetter (2009) found that

The frustrating obstacle I have encountered has not been political conservatism among my students, which, if derived from reading and engagement can serve as a useful contribution to classroom discussion, but rather an apolitical fatalism that students use as an excuse to be incurious and inattentive. I think that the current generation of students, who have suffered from the 'teaching to the test' method fostered by the No Child Left Behind policy, are also encumbered with a notion that political conflict is always negative and therefore to be avoided. This prompts many students to evade their own historical agency and responsibility (p. 505)

Such a phenomenon may be more visible in political science courses which some students assume is the study of political issues or politics. They do not wish to mimic the debates they see on network or cable news programs. Perhaps this is because they are witnessing a shouting match rather than democracy while, as we have noted above, they themselves are conflict-averse. Giroux (2009) presented another contemporary problem that

Dialogue is obviously a scary business because change itself is often perceived as a threat to both teachers and students.

undermines dialogue: the inability to listen and respond appropriately. He observed that "the obligation to listen, respect the views of others and engage in a literate exchange are increasingly reduced to the highly spectacularized embrace of an infantile emotionalism...made for television and is perfectly suited for emptying the language of public life of all substantive content". He added that "we have moved from a culture of questioning to a culture of shouting, and in doing so have restaged politics and power in both unproductive and anti-democratic ways". Given this situation, it is no wonder that many students say nothing because the only alternatives they see before them is to be silent or shout. Students may sense that the latter would not be appropriate in a college classroom so they seethe on the inside and put on a public face of neutrality.

Dialogue is obviously a scary business because change itself is often perceived as a threat to both teachers and students. Teachers may even perceive more of a threat because they come to the classroom with a body of knowledge about which they have great expertise and confidence. Lucey and Laney (2009) noted in their article that "Students are permitted to challenge the status quo and to question societal values. Of course, this is where some teachers may begin to feel uncomfortable (p. 261), and be inspired instead to "cover the material." This clinging to traditional teaching practice of delivering material outweighs their willingness to help students find their own meaning and voice in reference to what is being taught. Rarely do we assume that the teacher learns from students, and this greatly compromises the learning benefits

of genuine synergistic learning. Freire explained his (1995) notion of the “banking concept” of education that maintains and even stimulates mindlessness through the following attitudes and practices:

1. the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
2. the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
3. the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
4. the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly;
5. the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
6. the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;
7. the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
8. the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
9. the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
10. the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects (p.54).

Another issue that looms around the topic of controversy in the classroom is the one about fairness and balance. Seldom, if ever, is the question of fairness and balance raised during students’ twelve years of school. However, once students arrive at college and are exposed to alternative points of view, the furor about balance often erupts. Targ (2008) explained this by noting that

“Being fair, balanced, and objective is not enough to meet the needs of building a democratic space. The university (its educators) must use this democratic space to engage students in reflection about the pursuit of peace in this violent world, and the striving for social and economic justice and against racism, sexism, and economic inequality.”

Peace educator, Coleman McCarthy (2002) also addressed the issue of fairness and balance in education as follows:

Over the years, I’ve had suggestions from other teachers to offer what they call ‘balance’ in my courses, that I should give students ‘the other side.’ I’m never sure exactly what that means. After assigning students to read Gandhi I should have them also read Carl von Clausewitz? After Martin Luther King’s essay against the Vietnam War, Colin Powell’s memoir favoring the Persian Gulf War? After Justice William Brennan and Thurgood Marshall’s views opposing the death penalty, George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein’s favoring it? After a woman’s account of her using a nonviolent defense against a rapist, the thwarted rapist’s side?

Raising the problems of fairness and balance appears to be a political issue intended to stifle dissent rather than serve the highest aims and goals of education, especially in secondary and post-secondary levels. Also, fairness and balance are rarely raised in circumstances like the Cold War or after 9-11. Communism was not taught about during the Cold War, and the causes of 9-11 were limited to reductionistic statements about terrorists only being motivated by jealousy of the freedoms found in the U.S. It was expected that U.S. citizens would just hate communists and terrorists because they were evil and hated freedom. Any call for fairness and balance in these

situations would be soundly rejected and viewed as un-American. Thus, fairness and balance in the classroom are judged by those in power, determined by the popular ideology of the day.

Critical thinkers (with Marcia's achieved identity) have the wherewithal to both condemn the injustice of actions and fully understand the motivation behind the actions. Without such an understanding, there is a tendency to only react to events and not to be proactive and preventive. In other words, without understanding of causality, we can neither find nor utilize effective long term solutions to deal with problems in the world. The ability to pose and solve problems in the classroom is an important first step to finding those ultimate solutions.

From Thought to Action

A pedagogy of discomfort has the potential to develop critical analysis with the logical conclusion of social action and, in turn, social transformation. Freire has two important concepts that underline this process. One is *conscientization* defined as

an 'awakening of consciousness', a change of mentality involving an accurate, realistic awareness of one's locus in nature and society; the capacity to analyze critically its causes and consequences, comparing it with other situations and possibilities; and *action* of a logical sort aimed at transformation. Psychologically it entails an awareness of one's dignity (Sanders, 1968, p . 12).

Thus, it is important for teachers to raise problems and critically examine their complexity so that students can develop fully informed conscious awareness about them. This underscores the fact that problems have not only multiple causes but also multiple barriers to their solutions. A problem is exposed and then takes on new value and meaning now that it has been given such thoughtful attention. Given that, student understanding of problems in their full context creates more dissonance because complex problems sometimes beg for thoughtful yet realistic solutions.

One outcome of dissonance is the development of student passion in the pursuit of social justice. It brings students closer to the edge of their seats and toward forward movement. They don't just want to know about a problem but also they want to do something about it. They are no longer spectators but actors who want to make a difference. This is why a pedagogy of discomfort is an empowering pedagogical practice to best assure democratization of education. It is also why students need to be given tools to express their newfound commitment. In our classes, we have employed a variety of techniques to achieve this end. These include student public posters and presentations on solving world issues, presentations on the prison system, nonviolence, the environment, white privilege, war, religions, media and human diversity as well as small and large group discussions and exercises, guest speakers who include representatives of peace and social justice groups and staff and clients from social service agencies. Students also engage in advocacy actions such as service learning, making an afghan for Afghans or a Warm Up America blanket, letter writing, joining organizations or producing a work of art or music that represents some aspect of peace and social justice.

The second important and related concept that Friere offers is *praxis*.

The practice of freedom, as a critical *reflexive* praxis, must grasp the outward direction, meaning, and consequences of action, and also its inward meaning as the realization and articulation of a self. Therefore, education as a practice of freedom must include a kind of historico-cultural, political psychoanalysis that reveals the *formation* of the *self* and its *situation* in all their dynamic and dialectical relations. People then become critically conscious of themselves as the very sorts of creatures that produce (and are produced by) their culture and history, and to realize their freedom they become engaged in liberatory acts that challenge the limits (internal and external) of particular situations that maintain oppression or injustice (Glass, 2001, p. 18).

Therefore, students are not just examining problems and getting excited about solving them. They are also looking deeper inside themselves and discovering that they have the power to create change. As a corollary to this excitement, there is some evidence to suggest that students who engage in pro-social activities also experience improved mental health. Research by the Mental Health Foundation (Lockhart, 3 Jan 2013, “Mental Health can be improved by helping others”) suggested a relationship between helping others, connection to social life, and personal wellbeing. “Helping others can reduce stress, improve emotional wellbeing, benefit physical health, bring a sense of belonging and reduce isolation, helps us live longer, and gets rid of negative feelings.” (Lockhart 2013).

Without looking deeper inside themselves and deriving positive outputs from service activities, student passivity is ensured and democracy thwarted. It is no longer appropriate, if it ever was, to be content as a teacher to just cover material. Teachers must engage students and propel them to new heights of their human potential. They can do this through a variety of approaches such as those mentioned above as well as free-writes, debates, interviews, observations, policy analysis, media literacy, attending rallies and lectures, asking provocative questions, research papers, teaching about the role of technology in social change, and, above all, creating a climate of safety within which students feel secure in airing their views. Creating a safe place to test out diverse views minimizes external conflict while maximizing internal conflict. Modeling respectful disagreement and insisting upon it in the classroom is crucial for assuring students’ ability to transcend their comfort zones. The goal is to teach students to acknowledge internal conflict and embrace their discomfort. By achieving this, we democratize education, and promote student growth and development. In turn, our students become maximally effective and engaged professionals and citizens.

Conclusion

Thus, what appears to be needed is a serious commitment to a “pedagogy of discomfort” provided within a climate of safety that promotes cognitive dissonance – a conflict between what one believes and new contradictory information that is compellingly persuasive. However, this is no easy accomplishment because of two polarized positions. One is students’ tendency to readily accept new ideas without critical analysis and the other is their tendency to immediately reject any ideas that counter those they believe are their own. In other words, if cognitive dissonance is not experienced, critical examination is less likely to occur. If, on the other hand, there is too

much dissonance, students may deal with it by conflict avoidance. Therefore, it is incumbent on teachers to develop the reasoning behind opposing views instead of assuming that the new views that students develop are really their own: students need to be able to have the critical awareness to defend their position. Teachers must assure students' safety in order to achieve this defense. For Stromquist (2009) "education must accomplish a double mission: present the facts regarding the contours and complexities of given problems, and promote a vision of a better reality" (p.20).

Similar to the work of Wink (2005), to achieve this critical awareness, faculty must create assignments and educational experiences that move students beyond their comfort zone in a way that does not alienate them or seduce them into believing things that they have not subjected to critical analysis. Dialogue, service learning, and advocacy actions all provide the contexts within which problem posing and problem solving can occur. Mercieca (2009) used the example of Socrates to illustrate this point.

"We can solve every problem we encounter by simply taking the first step (which) is to bring into the open the involved problem, because unless people know it exists they will do nothing about it. But once they discover that it exists, they will immediately begin to figure out how such a problem may affect them. Then steps are definitely taken and the problem is solved."

In conclusion, education must be much more than disseminating information and covering material. It must push students to their intellectual limits and beyond in ways that stimulate cognitive restructuring. It must pose the question, "Why do we believe what we believe?" Once students have developed higher levels of awareness, they can't go back. Instead, they can use that awareness to critically reason and create solutions to some of society's most vexing problems. It is not enough to say, as Descartes, 'I think, therefore I am.' We must return to Aristotle: 'Excellence is not an act; it's a habit. We are what we repeatedly do.' A pedagogy of discomfort will help provide the conditions required for democratized education, social activism, social transformation, and ultimate peace and justice.

[1] As Gallagher notes, "15% of center clients are referred for psychiatric evaluation and 23% are on psychiatric medication. The latter is up from 20% in 2003, 17% in 2000, and 9% in 1994. In addition, 92% of directors believe that there is an increase in the number of students coming to campus who are already on psychiatric medication (up from 87.5 % in 2007)."

Scott R. Meyer is Professor Emeritus of Social Work at Plymouth State University and the Director of Field Education at Plymouth State University.

Leo R. Sandy is Professor Emeritus of Counselor Education and School Psychology at Plymouth State University.

Krisan Evenson is a political psychologist and has been an adjunct professor at Plymouth State University.

References

American Psychological Association (June 2009), *Ethics Committee Statement: No Defense to Torture*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ethics/programs/statement/torture-code.aspx> .

Blake, H., & Ooten, M. (2008). Bridging the divide connecting feminist histories and activism in the classroom. *Radical History Review*, Issue 102, Fall, 63-72

Boler, M. (1999). *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. London: Routledge.

Coffin, W.S. (1996). The spiritual and the secular: Can they meet? Retrieved from http://www.nku.edu/~longa/public_html/heros/coffin/install.html

Edelman, Murray (1985). *The symbolic uses of power: with a New Afterword*. Urbana, IL. University of Illinois Press.

Freedman, K. , & Schuler, K. (2002). Please stand by for an important message: Television in art education. *Visual Arts Reseach*, 28(2), 16-26

Freire, P. (1995). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Freire, P. (2009) The banking concept of education. Retrieved from <http://faculty.dwc.edu/wellman/Friere.htm>

Gallagher, Robert P., *National Survey of Counseling Center Directors 2011*. Retrieved from: <http://www.iacsinc.org/2011%20NSCCD.pdf>

Giroux, H. A. (2009). The spectacle of illiteracy and the crisis of democracy, *t r u t h o u t / Perspective*, September 15. Retrieved from http://www.progressivevalues.org/article_detail.cfm?articleID=405

Glass, R.D. (2001). On Paulo Freire's philosophy of praxis and the foundations of liberation education, *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 30. No. 2, 15–25

Hostetter, D. (2009). Reflections on peace and solidarity in the classroom. *Peace and Change*, Vol. 34, No. 4, October.

Institute for Democratic Education in America Retrieved from http://democraticeducation.org/index.php/democratic_education/

Jansen, J. 2009. *Knowledge in the blood: Confronting race and the apartheid past*. Stanford: Stanford University Press

Knight-Diop, M., & Oesterreich, H.A. (2009) Pedagogical possibilities: Engaging cultural rules of emotion, *Teacher's College Record*. Retrieved from <http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=15455>

Kroger, J. & Marcia, J. (2009). The identity statuses: Origins, meanings and interpretations. In Schwartz, S.J. et al, *Handbook of identity, theory and research*. New York: Springer

Lockhart, Liz. 3 Jan 2013, "Mental Health can be improved by helping others". 3 January 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.mentalhealth.co.uk/news/1695-mental-health-can-be-improved-by-helping-others.html>.

Loewen, James W. (1995). *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Long, K. (2008). No good wars: Teaching the history of modern America wars as a means of resisting current ones. *College Teaching*, Vol. 56-No. 2. Retrieved from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com.lola.plymouth.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=458913da-ea6f-47f2-a7b8-af8c1f62f687%40sessionmgr12&vid=2&hid=7>

Lucey, T.A. & Laney, J.D. (2009). This land was made for you and me: Teaching for economic justice in upper elementary and middle school grades. *The Social Studies*, November/December, 260-272.

Marcia, J. E., (1966), Development and validation of ego identity status, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3, 551-558.

Marcia, J.E. (1986. Clinical implications of the identity status approach within psychosocial developmental theory. *Cardenos de Consulte Psicologica*, 2, 23-34

McCarthy, C. (2002) Bringing pacifism to schools: children must be educated in nonviolence, 'the weapon of the strong' – Paths to Peace Education. In *National Catholic Reporter*, April 26, 2002. Retrieved on February 19, 2010 from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_25_38/ai_86047224/

McNeil, Linda (1988). *Contradictions of Control: School Structure and School Knowledge (Critical Social Thought)*. Routledge, 1988.

Mercieca, C. (2009). Perspective of two basic cultures: Confrontation versus harmony. Retrieved from http://www.djournal.co.kr/bbs_news/detail.php?code=Opinions&uid=8&start=0&ca on February 22 2010.

- Merelman, R. M. (1986). *Revitalizing political socialization*. In M. G. Hermann (Ed.), *Political psychology: Contemporary problems and issues* (pp. 277-319).
- Meyer, S. R. & Sandy, L.R. (2009). Educating for Global Citizenship in the New Millennium, *The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations*, Volume 9, Issue 1, 59-64
- Meyer, S. R. & Sandy, L.R. (2004). Beyond patriotism in the new millennium: Creating a new vision for education. *The International Journal of Learning*. Vol. 10, 2862-2872
- Revilla, A, (2004) Muxerista Pedagogy: Raza Womyn Teaching Social Justice through Student Activism. *High School Journal*, 87(4), 80-95.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*. The Guardian (UK). 29 September 2001. Accessed: 3 January 2013.
- Sanders, T.G. (1968). The Paulo Freire method: Literacy training and conscientization, *West Coast South America Series Chile*, Vol. XV, No. 1., 1 – 17, 1968.
- Sherif, Muzafer, O. J. Harvey, B. Jack White, William R. Hood, Carolyn W. Sherif (1954/1961). *Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robbers Cave Experiment*.
- Stromquist, N.P. (2009). Theorizing global citizenship: Discourses, challenges, and implications for education. In the *International Journal of Education for Democracy*, Vol 2, No. 1, June, 2009
- Targ, H. (2008) Higher education today: Theory and practice Retrieved from <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2009/targ100809.html>
- Welch, S.D. (2008). *Real peace, real security*. Mineapolis, MN: Fortress Press
- Wink, J. (2005). *Critical pedagogy: Notes from the real world*. Boston: Pearson
- Zembylas, M., & Boler, M. (2002) On the spirit of patriotism: Challenges of a “pedagogy of discomfort”. *Teacher College Record*, ID Number 11007 (2002). Retrieved from <http://www.trecord.org>
- Zembylas, M. (2012): Pedagogies of strategic empathy: Navigating through the emotional complexities of anti-racism in higher education, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17:2, 113-125.
- Zembylas, M. (2011) Boler and Zembylas on a “Pedagogy of discomfort”. Retrieved from <http://blogs.sun.ac.za/hopefulpedagoguessu/2011/03/13/zembylas-on-a-pedagogy-of-discomfort/>