Getting “Real” about Transformation:  
The Role of Brave Spaces in Creating Disorientation and Transformation  

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In the two decades since the publication of Zlotkowski’s (1995) influential article on the need for an enhanced academic focus to ensure the future of service-learning (SL), we have seen many changes in society and in higher education. In many ways, positive societal and educational changes – such as the increased capacity for technology to bring together geographically dispersed individuals to form social movements, increased institutional support for service-learning and community engagement (SLCE), and the internationalization of higher education – have encouraged SLCE to grow and realize much of Zlotkowski’s vision. At the same time, negative societal and educational changes – such as abuses of anonymity in virtual communication, bureaucratic barriers to collaboration, and increased questioning of the value of higher education – have impeded the development of SLCE. I am particularly concerned with a negative change that has led to an extreme and unnecessary insulation from disquieting realities, thereby limiting the potential for student, community, and our own transformational change.

Societal calls for warnings of potentially distressing content in what we are about to read or view are echoed in the academy in various ways. Particularly relevant for the SLCE movement are overly sanitized student service and learning programs (e.g., politically correct classroom conversations; chaperones who direct, rather than facilitate, experiences; selection of largely English-speaking destinations for global service). Although sometimes driven by legitimate concerns, faculty, staff, and institutional practices too often emerge from paternalistic desires for control over students and communities who are assumed to need protection. The result is that uncomfortable, disquieting experiences remain elusive, hindering deep dives into disorienting – and thus potentially transformative – opportunities for students, communities, and ourselves.

In the wake of national incidents of violence and community distrust – from Ferguson to Baltimore to Charleston – it is more essential than ever to create what Arao and Clemens (2013) call “brave spaces.” Brave spaces are qualitatively distinct from “safe spaces.” With safe spaces, ground rules and expectations of tone and process are established to moderate emotions and minimize conflict to approximate an ideal of safety. In contrast, brave spaces are environments that invite interactions in which participants feel able to be honest, candid, self-disclosing, and generally genuine with one another. Safe space practices, norms, and language often put in place rules that interfere with quality discussion around such SLCE-related and difficult topics as justice and equity, discrimination and oppression. While such practices are to some extent grounded in the need to establish norms that invite and empower otherwise silent or silenced voices, Arao and Clemens question “the degree to which safety is an appropriate or reasonable expectation for any honest dialogue about social justice” (p. 139).

We need to find a balance between, on the one hand, sensitizing students to how easy it is to inadvertently harm, disrespect, trespass on, and disrupt the lived experiences, cultures, and identities of unfamiliar others (i.e., SLCE community partners, other students) and, on the other hand, buffering students from uncomfortable conversations and encounters that may deeply disorient them – emotionally, cognitively, interpersonally, and culturally. If the ground rules for our interactions with one another become so limiting that authenticity is stifled, will not the disorientation required for transformation also be stifled? Rather than tapping the transformative capacities of SLCE experiences, are we sheltering our students, our community partners, and ourselves from the “real” dynamics that could help us become more open to critical conversation and more empowered to relate with one another authentically?

Transformative Learning through Disorientation and Dialogue

Getting real about transformation is not easy, nor is it supposed to be. Transformation requires difficult, critical self-reflection and vulnerability. It requires fundamental shifts in how we think about disagreement and conflict. It requires reframing the tensions amongst individuals, communities, and systems so that transformation can occur within and across all of
them. Palmer’s (2010) work suggests that creatively holding tension – rather than seeking to eliminate or resolve it – between our ideas and those of others, between our aspirations and our behaviors, and between individuals and broader systems can lead to greater democratic engagement and social justice.

The process that develops the ability to hold tension, critically engage, and shift attitudes is transformative learning. Transformative learning at its most basic is a “means for teaching change through intentional action” (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller, & Shapiro, 2009, p. 1). It involves shifting meaning perspectives – the ways we see ourselves in relation to the world around us. Of particular importance here, Clark (1993) affirms that transformative learning is not only about changing the ways in which individuals approach their future experiences, but is also a catalyst for more far-reaching change, impacting larger wholes – cultures, institutions, and systems.

Transformative learning hinges on disorientation (Mezirow, 1981), which can be prompted by cross-cultural exchanges, unfamiliar communities, new information acquisition, emotional discomfort, and engagement with unfamiliar perspectives, any of which can challenge previously held assumptions. Service-learning lends itself to such disorientation. For instance, an SL project in the first year (see Bauer, Kniffin, & Priest in this collection of essays) can be disorienting for a number of reasons: the counternormative nature of learning in SL, the cross-cultural interfaces, and the broadening of learning environments beyond campus. If we explicitly design SLCE as a brave space, learners are even more likely to experience disorientation as they wrestle with tensions related to agency, social responsibility, and worldview; coupled with the necessary processing via critical reflection in a brave space, such experience can lead to transformative learning (Kiely, 2005; Kuh, O’Donnell, & Reed, 2013).

Critical reflection – which can take place as a difficult dialogue or individual self-exploration – is a vehicle for developing the metacognitive skills by which we learn to make meaning of and grow from disorienting experiences and explore points of view and identities other than our own, thereby aiding transformative learning. Gergen, McNamie, and Barrett (2001) identify “transformative dialogue” as a means to create “relational responsibility, self-expression, affirmation, coordination, reflexivity, and the co-creation of new realities” (p. 679). Aarao and Clemens (2013) call on educators to facilitate students’ development of critical reflection skills by modeling and intentionally planning brave spaces to break through polite, surface-level discussions. Multi-stakeholder transformative SLCE design can promote disorientation through authentic dialogue and critical reflection among all participants to generate transformative change in individuals, communities, and systems. Further, brave space dialogue amongst a team of faculty, students, and community members can mediate the oft-discussed tensions between prioritizing student learning and community impact.

Critical dialogues about social and political differences – an essential part of democratic citizenship – are rare in practice (Bickmore & Parker, 2014). Villa (2001) uses the term “Socratic citizenship” to describe building a lifelong citizen identity through an intentional, individualized process that is critical in thought and dissident in action. Socratic citizenship implies the right and the responsibility to stay engaged critically as an active community member. In SLCE, Socratic citizenship can be leveraged as an ideal and an approach, the intentional practice of which can produce lifelong citizen identities among all participants. It requires and contributes to brave spaces in which critical voices are neither silenced nor experienced as bullying.

Achieving Multi-level Transformation

In his work on transformative learning, Mezirow (1991) focused on the central role of critical reflection and dialogue as processors of disorienting experiences that lead to meaning perspective shifts within and beyond individuals. With that framework in mind, we can imagine an iterative, critical, dialogue-centered approach to citizenship that could leverage interconnections for multi-level transformation. Those connected transformative experiences could cause a “ripple effect” that would lead to shifts among all stakeholders (students, community members, faculty, and staff) and across all levels (individuals, groups, communities, and systems). The process of dialogue, critical reflection, and deliberate capacity-building for meaningful interaction across sameness and otherness promotes an environment conducive to multi-level transformation. This process on a community level – increasing collective capacity for difficult dialogues and generating shared vocabulary that emphasizes community assets – can help break down deficit narratives, mediate conflict, address societal misconceptions, and prompt critical action based on new understandings of the world at both micro and macro levels. As this experience of collective, engaged dialogue and critical examination of citizenship and systems occurs, larger-scale, multi-level change may be catalyzed.

Efforts to promote student and community transformation can take many forms and formats. Specifically, if we seek to achieve this “ripple effect,” we need to take a multi-level approach. This involves more than simply emphasizing the coming together
of multiple stakeholders (see Hicks, Seymour, & Puppo in this collection of essays). Rather, what I wish to emphasize here is the process by which transformation occurs in various stakeholders and then affects transformation on other levels. An individual can experience transformation and then assemble a collective based on that transformation. The work of such a collective might lead to transformed ways of talking within and about a community. This in turn could lead to the elimination of stereotypes and a reevaluation of policies. Such a change can happen in an interconnected way, across levels, beyond that first, necessary act of bringing more diverse stakeholders to the table.

I offer two examples of programming designed to facilitate such transformation. They make explicit what SLCE might look like when it is intentionally designed as a brave space: confronting participants with disorientation, incorporating critical dialogue, nurturing authentic interactions, inviting individuals to try on new understandings and identities, and refusing to shy away from experiences or critical reflections that are challenging, uncomfortable, and transformative.

The Global Citizenship Program at Lehigh University pushes learners beyond “comfortable” service into a realm in which they must practice agency, difficult dialogues, and cross-cultural communication (Gisolo & Stanlick, 2012). We work in partnership with the local refugee resettlement agency to develop collaborative programming that includes intensive critical reflection and dialogue among undergraduates and the local refugee population. Over the course of a semester, undergraduate student teams learn about the philosophy and impact of place, read classic civic literature (e.g., Pericles’ Funeral Oration), and serve with refugee neighbors. The students participate in cultural discussions and exchanges, share knowledge and compare expectations of citizenship in the U.S. and abroad, and hold educational workshops for the refugees. Discussion topics include stories of family (those able to make it to the U.S. and those left behind), escaping to international refugee camps, and the harsh realities of life under oppressive regimes in refugees’ home countries. Critical dialogue takes place in class (e.g., student speeches followed by open discussion and critique), in facilitated online forums (e.g., weekly writing prompts with expectations for engaging candidly and respectfully with others’ ideas), and in face-to-face interactions among community members, students, and faculty (e.g., informal, frank discussions about refugee resettlement with local citizens in public spaces).

SLCE experiences in this program – with their multiple layers of stakeholder engagement and critical dialogue – are intended to positively influence how refugees are perceived in the community while helping students gain an understanding of their own agency. They connect students, faculty, staff, and community members in meaningful activism and advocacy for refugee rights and support while also honoring disparate and emerging perspectives on refugee resettlement. Raising public awareness of issues around refugee resettlement, especially in light of the crisis in Syria, is crucial in reducing stereotypes and conflict within communities that will become the new homes of refugees in the near future. Allentown/Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, the area within which this program takes place, is one such refugee resettlement region, so the stakes around our efforts to get “real” about transformation are immediate and first-hand (see Siemers, Harrison, Claytson, & Stanley in this collection of essays for a discussion of the power of belonging to and connecting with local and global places). In the 2015-2016 academic year, we are deepening this work by adopting the Center for Courage & Renewal’s Action Guide (Jackson & Scribner, 2015) to conduct democratic discussion circles – another way to broaden conversation, engage in Socratic citizenship, and increase the chances for disorienting experiences. Through opportunities to experience disorientation via mismatched expectations, cross-cultural interactions, and difficult new information, learners are in an environment primed for transformative possibilities.

A second example of an attempt to design for multi-level transformation is the Bethlehem Unbound community storytelling project that takes place within the framework of Lehigh’s Mountaintop Experience. Mountaintop is a unique learning community that brings students from varied disciplines and academic career stages together with faculty and community members to implement participant-driven projects during the summer in communities both local and global. As an open-ended inquiry endeavor, participants begin with a question. During the summer of 2015, the location was South Side Bethlehem, and the guiding question was: How does one authentically portray the stories of a community without misappropriating stories or propagating a deficit narrative? After exploring a variety of storytelling media and having intense, personal discussions with local residents, participants settled on a semi-structured interview project that highlighted local business owners and long-time residents telling their stories authentically on film in the first person. In light of the program’s commitment to relationships with students as colleagues, the interview project decision-making processes were driven by the students, with faculty and graduate student mentors taking a facilitator role rather than the usual teaching role (Zlotkowski, Longo, & Williams, 2006; also see
Hicks, Seymour, & Puppo in this collection of essays). This expectation of civic and personal agency was extremely disorienting to students, yet they thrived despite not being given a safety net or quick answers to their dilemmas.

The result was a multi-faceted project that engaged students and local community members to tell authentic, complex stories of individual histories in the South Side of Bethlehem. The project culminated in a YouTube channel¹ that houses these stories of the South Side's history and culture and serves as a marker of pride for community members and students⁴. The power of this project was in the iterative storytelling process and the relationships built across stakeholder groups, both of which help allay a deficit narrative while also acknowledging and educating participants about the sometimes difficult history of Lehigh's relationship with the South Side. As we worked with primary sources and human storytellers on a co-created project within a team that gently nudged participants toward honesty and authenticity, a brave space emerged in which all of us could delve deeply into the difficult community-campus history while also sharing in the positive benefits of establishing a trust relationship.

These are but two examples of how a program can be intentionally designed to try to effect multi-stakeholder transformation. Disorientation abounds in the midst of cross-cultural and outside-the-comfort-zone experiences such as these that allow participants to try on new understandings and identities. Students, community members, and faculty engage in difficult conversations about inequality, privilege, and the ever-changing and diverse American landscape – with a deliberate intent to avoid sheltering or buffering one another from sometimes uncomfortable discussions or painful historical and contemporary truths. Grounding program design in the Socratic citizenship ideal, we strive to develop all participants as philosopher-citizens who are critical and questioning as well as dedicated to the larger common good. Current program evaluations reveal learner growth in agency, metacognition, and capacity and comfort with critical dialogue as well as robust reciprocal relationships that benefit all. We continue to improve the brave spaces process and to assess change among all stakeholders and across all levels so as to better understand the contributions to and resulting dimensions of the various transformations.

**Leveraging Disorientation and Authentic Dialogue for Multi-Level Transformation**

SLCE has proved to be an effective, high-impact experience for students (Kuh, O’Donnell, & Reed, 2013), yet its promise for advancing either long-term student civic identity development or social justice within communities has not been fully realized (Mitchell, Battistoni, Keene, & Reiff, 2013; Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). One possible strategy for fulfilling that larger potential is intentionally planning disorienting experiences coupled with authentic, critical dialogue to enable positive change among students, communities, and ourselves— including the development of citizen-philosopher identities.

SLCE can engage us directly and productively with tensions within ourselves and in the world around us; and when intentionally designed as a brave space it can lead to disorientation, which, in turn, can lead to transformative learning. If, instead, we maintain that SLCE experiences should be easy, clear-cut, and non-threatening, we are doing a disservice to everyone involved. Let us engage with the difficult, hold the tension, flourish in the ambiguous, and intentionally seek disorientation so as to find our way to more authentic ways of being in communities and with each other.

**Notes**

¹ In 2015, a spate of violent incidents – 2 high-profile, police-involved deaths of African-American men and a mass shooting at a historically significant African-American church – set in motion national movements to address institutional racism and gun violence.

² As of September 17, 2015, 4,086,760 Syrian refugees have been registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as they flee war and persecution (source: http://data.unhcr.org/syrian-refugees/regional.php)

³ The YouTube Channel for the Bethlehem Unbound Storytelling Project can be found at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC67CtEUlhF5CMgLjusXzXWA

⁴ In addition, these stories are shown to incoming first year Lehigh students to help seed a positive narrative of the local community and to challenge any negative stereotypes (i.e., deficit narratives of “underserved populations”) entering students may bring with them.

**References**


Author

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