Do I Really Know You? Do You Really Know Me? And, How Important Is It that We Do? Relationship and Empathy in Differing Learning Contexts

Elizabeth Kasl
Independent Scholar

Lyle Yorks
Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City

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Abstract: Pedagogical strategies that promote empathy foster learning by supporting meaningful dialogue. Aware that these strategies create risks as well as benefits, educators can make judgments about their potential value by examining relational power, positionality and emotional valence.

Our purpose is to help adult educators analyze the role of relationship and empathy in adult learning.

Learning within Relationship

Adult education theory and practice have long promoted the belief that adults learn most meaningfully when they draw on their lived experience, often through dialogue with others about the meaning of this experience (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993; Mezirow, 2000). Dialogue with others may be with peers or teachers. The adult educator, for example, is often cast in the role of mentor or partner or mid-wife to learning and development (Robertson, 1996). Thus, we recognize the importance of human relationships in learning.

In his review of literature about transformative learning, Edward Taylor (2007) observes,

> Previous research found establishing relationships with others as one of the essential factors in a transformative experience (Taylor 1998). It is trustful relationships that allow individuals to have questioning discussions, share information openly and achieve mutual and consensual understanding. Until recently not much was known about the nature of these relationships. However, recent research begins to offer insight into the complex nature of transformative relationships. (p. 179)

Although much of the attention to relationship has happened in the transformative learning literature, we argue that clarifying the role of relationship is applicable to a broad spectrum of adult learning. Jack Mezirow is typically associated with the concept of transformative learning, but his initial intention was to articulate a comprehensive theory of adult learning, within which he examined "transformative dimensions" (1991). His conceptual analysis of differences among learning goals encompasses a full spectrum: elaborating existing frames of reference, learning new frames of reference, transforming points of view, transforming habits of mind (Mezirow, 2000). We adopt Mezirow's delineation.

We propose a framework of analysis that we believe will assist educators in evaluating the role

of relationship and need for empathy in learning. We refer not only to learning in the adult education classroom, but also in the workplace and community organizations, as well as the hermeneutic process of meaning-making in various kinds of qualitative and action research.

We base our analysis on our review of related literature, both theoretical and empirical, as well as our personal experience as scholar-practitioners in the fields of action research and transformative learning.

Creating Empathic Fields

Dialogue helps adults learn from their experience because they have a chance to test their perceptions by expressing them to others and to become exposed to and engaged with the perceptions of others. Steven Schapiro, Ilene Wasserman, and Placida Gallegos (2012) identify three kinds of learning that can emerge from the dialogue space within groups: personal growth and awareness, relational empathy across differences, and critical systemic consciousness.

We have argued elsewhere that people's capacity to learn from one another in a dialogue space is limited by what we call the *paradox of diversity* (Kasl & Yorks, 2012; Yorks & Kasl, 2002). By this we mean that diversity among the dialogue participants generates rich potential for learning because it exposes everyone to a breadth of different ideas and perspectives. Paradoxically, that diversity may prevent participants from being able to learn from each other's perspectives. Their lived experiences are so different that they cannot perceive how the other's perspective might be valid. They cannot find the common ground that would enable learning.

Empathy opens the way to that common ground. Empathy is the ability to imagine oneself in another's place and understand the other's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions. The paradox of diversity is a strong force impeding the creation of an empathic field. People whose worlds are very different find it difficult to relate empathically.

We have used John Heron's theory of personhood (Heron, 1992) to explain why expressive ways of knowing are more effective than rational analysis in creating empathic space (Yorks & Kasl, 2002, 2006; Kasl & Yorks, 2012). Although others may offer different explanatory theories, it is increasingly well established that pedagogical strategies employing expressive ways of knowing are effective in creating empathic fields of connection with the feelings, desires, ideas and actions of others (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009; Clark, 2012; Jarvis, 2012; Tyler & Swartz, 2012, Yorks & Kasl, 2006).

Our knowledge about how to create empathic space is established, but educators must be judicious in making decisions about whether or how to use these pedagogical strategies. Although strategies employing expressive knowing are powerful, they also come with costs. They can require large amounts of time and, because they generate emotional vulnerability, they have high potential for putting students at risk (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009; Ettling, 2012).

Assessing Dimensions of Difference that Affect Empathy in the Dialogue Space

We propose three dimensions of difference that can help educators make pedagogical decisions about whether or how to attempt creating empathic space.

Continuum of Relational Power in the Dialogue Space

Relational power can be assessed on a continuum, with peer relationship at one pole and hierarchy at the other. Continua of relational power can be based on formal or informal dimensions. In the formal, defined roles assign rights and responsibilities to some participants, but not others. Examples of formal hierarchy might be learner and teacher, or team member and team leader. In the continuum of power that is informal, hierarchies of influence recognize inequality among the participants, based not on status roles, but on factors such as content expertise, likeability, or other forms of influence.

Peer _____FORMAL _____Hierarchy

Peer _____INFORMAL _____Hierarchy

Educators can expect more difficulty creating empathic space when relational power is hierarchical.

Continuum of Individual Positionality in the Dialogue Space

People belong to a large number of identity groups, such as gender, race, age, class, or sexual orientation. Dominating social structures award more power and privilege to some categories within each of these groups than to others. In turn, the norms and values associated with these privileged categories dominate the social order and are perceived as normative, even by members of the society who are not in the privileged identity group. Domination by these privileged norms, beliefs, and values is hegemony. In the continuum of positionality, one pole describes people who are in all or a large number of the favored groups. For example, in the United States at this time, power and privilege accrue to people who are male, white, young, upper middle class, and heterosexual. Such people are positioned in the hegemonic center. The other pole in the positionality continuum is the location of people at the margins.

Margins _____Hegemonic Center

In making decisions about whether or how to promote empathic space, educators can expect more difficulty when participants are at or near the hegemonic center. Because those at the hegemonic center receive constant messages from the social order that their perspectives are normative, and thus they as individuals are normal, they experience being open to other worldviews as challenging. People who occupy the margins are often skilled at perceiving other worldviews. They develop double consciousness (Du Bois, 1994) as a way of adapting to a social order that is dominated by the worldviews of others.

Particularly challenging is dialogue space occupied by a mixed group—groups that include both people at the center and those at the margins. Conflict, self-righteousness, exasperation, and puzzlement are common impediments to dialogue and empathy.

Continuum of Emotional Valence in the Dialogue Space

Individuals vary greatly in what they have at stake in opening themselves to new learning in the dialogue space. Some content may be highly threatening to their sense of who they are as people.

Low _____*High*

In making decisions about whether or how to promote empathic space, educators should consider risks and potential rewards. High emotional valence can contribute powerfully to significant learning but should only be undertaken with supportive structures for the emotionally vulnerable.

Translating into Practice

Although we described the dimensions separately, they are not discreet and will combine in multiple combinations that are too many to be examined here. Instead, we look at one example of "empathy-in-action" and note the ways in which the dimensions interact.

An Example: Synergic Inquiry to Expand Racial Consciousness

Carole Barlas, Angela Cherry-Smith, Penny Rosenwasser, and Colette Winlock (2006) describe the experience of their graduate student cohort using synergic inquiry to expand racial consciousness. The cohort undertook this 6-month project in the middle of the 30-month period they spent together in intensive course work.

Synergic inquiry is a process in which teams strive to understand themselves and others by using a four-step process: self knowing, other knowing, difference holding, difference transcending. In the cohort's case, the topic of inquiry was racial consciousness and the teams were 6 African American students and 13 White students. In the Self Knowing phase, students met for 3 months within race-based teams, using a variety of expressive practices (such as storytelling, drama, visual arts, music, body-based knowing) to understand their own racial consciousness, both as individuals and as a group. In the second three months the two teams met together to engage in Other Knowing. They devised exercises for the other team that also used expressive practices. For example, the Black team created a scenario in which people were arrested because of their eye color and manhandled in frightening ways by police officers. The White team acted out the scenario while the Black team watched. White team members experienced fear and disorientation, which individuals were able to describe after the exercise. Black team members reported they could see the fear; they also gave the White team feedback about how some members' behavior was inconsistent with Black lived experience, such as responding negatively to the exercise and discontinuing participation. These kinds of activities continued until Other Knowing was improved — that is, White team members became more able to embody the Black lived experience, and Blacks to embody the White. This ability to know the other is called Difference Holding as a synergic inquiry step, but in the language of this paper, it is a fine example of an empathic field. With only six months, the cohort never progressed to attempting Difference Transcending.

In this experience, all three types of learning described by Shapiro, Wasserman, and Gallegos (2012) emerged. Individuals grew in awareness of their personal racial consciousness about self and other; the two teams created a space with relational empathy; through expanded racial consciousness the cohort created critical systemic consciousness and later was able to effect some structural change in the academic program in which the students were enrolled.

In examining dimensions of difference, we observe that the relative absence of hierarchy fostered creation of the empathic field. The supervising faculty recruited both Black and White students

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to meet with him outside of class in order to design learning activities for the cohort. He taught them about synergic inquiry; they collaborated on designing learning structures, but during the cohort meetings, the students facilitated all inquiry activities, within both the race-based teams and the cohort as a whole.

We observe that in this relational space where race was the prominent identity category, one team perched at the hegemonic center and the other at the margins. Within the teams, class and gender became issues in the White team; assimilation and skin tone in the Black. One of the cohort's primary observations was that the White team had more difficulty with Other Knowing and Difference Holding than the Black. Double consciousness gave Black team members a head start on understanding the other; as the process unfolded and both teams progressed in expanding members' racial consciousness, the Black team seemed always to be a step or two ahead. The cohort became aware of how the Black team's content expertise created a hierarchy of influence.

Regarding the emotional valence for individual learners, attraction was high. Members of the Black team treasured being able to meet in private, to explore Self Knowing with candor that is not possible in the presence of Whites. White team members could be vulnerable in expressing to each other their fears about race, identity, and isolation.

Years after the project was finished, Elizabeth asked one of the Black women from the cohort what she had learned in her three years in the cohort curriculum.

> Without hesitation she answered, "One thing I learned is that white people really are that unconscious. I am fifty years old, and my whole life I've thought that white people had to do this stuff on purpose because nobody could be so dumb. I knew if I did the things White folks do, I'd be doing it with malice. And now I can see.... " Her voice trailed off, then shaking her head in disbelief and revelation, she continued, "...they really *don't* do these dumb things on purpose." (Yorks & Kasl 2002, p. 179)

This Black woman entered the life world of white people and discovered through empathic connection that her previous beliefs about their life worlds were wrong. In Mezirow's conceptualization, she learned a new frame of reference or possibly, a transformed point of view.

General Application

Effectiveness as educator/researchers requires a more finely tuned assessment of the quality of relationship appropriate to varying learning contexts and goals. Adult educators work in a variety of settings, each of which generates a body of theory that guides practice: classrooms that range from basic literacy and personal development to higher education, workplaces, community venues that address pressing social issues, and research—particularly action based research. An empathic field becomes increasingly important as learning goals involve the excavation of taken-for-granted assumptions and new encounters across divergent social strata and/or experiences. For example, many challenges in community settings involve diverse ideologies and biases that are stimulated by encountering the "other," in whatever way the other is perceived. The same is true in the workplace, where increasing levels of uncertainty and rates of change challenge the experience of members of the organization regardless of levels of responsibility and power.

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