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Recommended Citation

Kasl, Elizabeth S. and Yorks, Lyle (2016). "How Can We Know Each Other when We are So Different? Untangling the Complexity of Diverse Life Experience and Interconnection—A Model for Navigating the Paradox of Diversity to Create Empathic Learning Space," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2016/papers/25

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How Can We Learn Together When We are so Different? Untangling the Complexity of Diverse Life Experience and Interconnection—A Model for Navigating the Paradox of Diversity to Create Optimal Conditions for Learning

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Abstract: We propose a model that offers guidance for maximizing the positive impact of diversity on learning in groups. It describes how diversity, dialogue, emotion, and empathy interact.

Keywords: paradox of diversity, empathic space, dialogue, emotional valence

We propose a model that will be useful to practitioners and scholars for creating robust learning environments amidst diversity. Whether in higher education classrooms, workplaces, or community groups, adult education practitioners face challenges inherent in an increasingly diverse population. The proposed model provides guidance for assessing pedagogical challenges created by diversity. It also suggests direction for theory development and research.

Practical and Theoretical Relevance

The practical and theoretical void this model addresses is the relationship between dialogue and the *paradox of diversity* in the process of learning. The model is rooted in our personal experience as scholar–practitioners as well as our reviews of relevant literature.

When defining learning, Gregory Bateson (1972) stated it best: "The word '*learning'* undoubtedly denotes *change* of some kind. To say what *kind* of change is a delicate matter" (p. 283). Literature in adult learning characterizes change in various ways. For example, Edward Cell (1984) describes change in complexity of the learning task: a) responding to a situation; b) changing our interpretation of a situation; c) learning how to change our interpretations of a situation, and d) modifying or creating new concepts that provide new possibilities for interpreting situations. Robert Kegan (2000) conceptualizes learning as informative (changes in *what* we know) or developmental (changes in *how* we know). Jack Mezirow describes two major domains of learning: instrumental and communicative.

The model presented here concerns itself with communicative learning, "learning what others mean when they communicate with you. This often involves feelings, intentions, values, and moral issues" (Mezirow, 2012, p. 77). Although Mezirow's description of communicative learning relates to its role as an agent for transformation, the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics of communicative learning are relevant beyond transformation. Simply said, communicative learning involves effective collaboration when learning with others.

Dialogue is the process that creates communicative learning. By presenting ideas to others and encountering others' points of view, learners can clarify, expand and attune their thinking. When participants in dialogue are diverse, dialogue's power to create significant learning is potentially leveraged. Open sharing of different experiences, perspectives, and capabilities can lead to changed meaning perspectives. As they come to new understanding of the experiences of the "other," those engaged in the dialogue realize how their own pre-conscious reactions mediate their openness to others' abilities and suggestions.

We note two examples of how dialogue among diverse individuals fostered individual

learning: The first involves graduate students (6 Black and 13 White) who used synergic inquiry to guide dialogue about race and expand individual racial consciousness (Barlas, Cherry-Smith, Rosenwasser & Winlock, 2006; Kasl & Yorks, 2016). The second example is a group of eleven women diverse in race, language, and education who participated in a community education program on breastfeeding. As a result of their collaborative inquiry, these women developed new epistemologies, changing from being learners dependent on received knowledge to becoming learners who construct knowledge. In the process they discovered that cultural difference can be a trusted resource (Smith, 2002). In addition to changing meaning perspectives of individual learners, collaboration among people with diverse capabilities and experiences can result in more creative outcomes and enhanced team performance in work place settings (Phillips, 2014).

We used the phrase "potentially leveraged" because even in settings of facilitated dialogue, diversity often obstructs open sharing and inquiry, leading to debate instead of dialogue, and to conflict, low engagement, and/or poor morale. As Mannix and Neale (2005), among others, have summarized in looking at diverse work teams, diversity creates social divisions that in turn create negative performance outcomes. In short, the potential of diversity to create more inclusive meaning perspectives and innovative outcomes is seldom realized.

The *paradox of diversity* encapsulates diversity's dual potential for negative or positive impact on dialogue, and thus, on learning: Although interaction among people who hold different perspectives has potential to generate new learning, diverse life experiences can instead block learning. People's life situations can be so divergent that they literally inhabit different worlds and cannot imagine that each other's perspectives might be valid. In this circumstance, dialogue's potential for creating meaningful learning is lost (Yorks & Kasl, 2002; Kasl & Yorks, 2012, 2016). Below we propose a model for managing the paradox of diversity when learning through dialogue.

Elements of the Model

The proposed model includes four elements: dialogue, empathic space, dimensions of difference, and emotional valence. Educators can assess each of these elements when considering how to leverage diversity as a positive force for learning.

Dialogue

Dialogue is an interchange among two or more people in which they share personal points of view. Dialogue involves open-ended exploration, in contrast to the advocacy fostered by debate (Bohm, 1996). To understand the role of dialogue, we consider both its content and context.

Content. Dialogue is generally perceived as an exchange of ideas that uses reflective thought and analysis. We expand the idea of dialogue to include the whole person and characterize dialogue content as a continuum of wholeness. At one pole, content is embodied interaction that includes emotions, ideas, and action. We call this content *whole-person dialogue*. At the other pole, content is dominated by idea exchange, analysis, and critical reflection. We call this content *partial-person dialogue*. This whole-person characterization differs markedly from dominant perceptions of dialogue in the adult education literature, where the link between emotion and cognition has been under-developed (Taylor, 2014/2015).

Context. To describe dialogue context, we begin with a typology developed by Steven Schapiro, Ilene Wasserman, and Placida Gallegos (2012). They examine dialogue characteristics within each of three systems levels that are targeted for learning and change—individual

members of the dialogue group, the dialogue group itself, or a larger system that the dialogue group is attempting to change. These scholars are concerned specifically with transformative learning and identify transformative learning goals for the three systems levels, respectively, as: personal growth and self-awareness for individuals, relational empathy across differences within the dialogue group, and group members' critical systemic consciousness about the system the group works to transform. The authors emphasize that process and outcomes for different group purposes are not discrete. When all three types of group purposes overlap, the convergence "illustrates the 'sweet spot' where we have the most leverage for change through engaging simultaneously at all three levels" (p. 361).

Adopting these scholars' analysis, we characterize dialogue context as the level of system that is the primary learning target for the dialogue group. We adjust our vision to accommodate a broader purpose than Schapiro, Wasserman, and Gallegos, who analyze dialogue's relationship to transformative learning. Our model concerns itself with a fuller range of communicative learning, including modest changes as well as transformation. In order to make space for this broader construction of learning, we shift the way Schapiro, Wasserman, and Gallegos characterize the dialogue group that is focused on its own development. Because they are describing transformative learning, the authors talk about dialogue in a group where the focus is "group identity" and the goal is "relational empathy across differences." We re-characterize that formulation to also include focus on group task when the goal is effective collaboration. Examples include communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or work teams employing action learning (O'Neil, Yorks, Nilson, & Kolodny, 1997). When the group is thus oriented toward task, the dialogue process can be perceived more as the engine that fosters collaboration than as the means for creating relational empathy across differences. Empathy might enhance the quality of collaboration, but is not perceived as the end goal for learning.

Empathic Space

By empathic space, we refer to characteristics of the dialogue encounter that are conducive to developing empathy.

Empathy is the capacity to understand experience from another person's point of view. A distinction documented by neuroscience researchers is the difference between *cognitive* and *affective* empathy (Reniers, et al., 2011). The former refers to the process of building a mental model that represents the emotions and experience of others; the latter refers to experiencing the feelings of others vicariously. We have argued that when individuals are very different from each other, the construct of cognitive empathy is flawed (Kasl & Yorks, 2016). In this situation there is not enough common ground for one person to use his or her personal experience as a basis for imagining the "other's" experience and point of view accurately. Empathy cannot develop.

Storytelling is often recommended as a way to help people understand their "other" (Schapiro, et.al, 2012). Storytelling, along with other forms of expressive communication such as mime or visual art provide pathways of communication that access the other's felt experience and emotional life more directly than explanatory sharing (Kasl & Yorks, 2012, 2016).

Dimensions of Difference

To be alert to the impact of the paradox of diversity, two dimensions of difference should be examined: relational power and hegemonic embeddedness.

Relational Power. Distribution of power among dialogue participants ranges on a continuum from peer to hierarchy, where hierarchy can be formal or informal. In formal

hierarchy, some participants are assigned roles that involve particular obligations, which typically include setting general directions, providing oversight, and conducting assessments. Examples are manager and work group members, teacher and students, community organization director and volunteer staff. In informal hierarchy, individuals attain influence because they have valued expertise, social capital, or backgrounds that other group members lack. Embedded cultural values that shape social identities such as race, gender, or socio-economic class also create informal hierarchies of influence. Relational power applies to power relations among subgroups and subcultures as well as among individuals.

Hegemonic Embeddedness. The continuum of hegemonic embeddedness describes an individual's conscious awareness of his or her personal relationship to hegemony. Hegemony refers to domination of an entire society by a subgroup or subculture, whose values and practices are regarded as normative for the larger culture. Members of the dominating subgroup accrue unearned privilege. Sometimes people outside the subgroup internalize the hegemony, subscribing to the sanctioned norms themselves. At one pole of this continuum, people are embedded in hegemony. They internalize hegemony as "the right way to be" and are unaware that they have uncritically adopted culturally prescribed norms. The other pole locates hegemonic periphery, where people view hegemony critically and are aware of how it affects their lives. People from both privileged and marginal groups are found at all locations on this continuum of hegemonic consciousness. Those in the hegemonic periphery who are members of marginalized groups often develop double consciousness (DuBois, 1994).

Emotional Valence

The model assesses emotion in terms of its valence, that is, the strength of emotions aroused during dialogue. High valence describes strong emotional force of either attraction or aversion. Low valence applies when participants are indifferent. As attraction, high emotional valence contributes significantly to learning; as aversion, it is a vigorous impediment. When learners' prized principles or taken-for-granted meaning perspectives are questioned, both the individuals and the group as a learning setting are vulnerable.

Interrelationship among Elements of the Model

The concept of learning characterizes an immense variety in types of change, from simple to complex—in meaning perspectives and in epistemological development. A major contributor to any type of learning is coming to know how others perceive issues and experiences, as can be discovered through dialogue.

The process of learning through dialogue is enhanced when participants are able to understand each other empathically, that is, to understand points of view from within the context of the other's life experience. When people come from similar experiential worlds, they are more able to create cognitive models of the others' felt experiences than when they come from highly dissimilar life experiences. Thus, there is a direct relationship between the magnitude of diversity and the pedagogical complexity that is needed to create empathic space.

Empathic space is contingent on *dialogue content* and *dimensions of difference*. Whole-person dialogue promotes empathic space and is facilitated with expressive communication such as storytelling, somatic activity, or artistic exploration; the need for wholeness in dialogue relates directly to the magnitude of diversity among participants. When content or process puts high *emotional valence* in play, the dynamics of differences in relational power and hegemony are triggered and intensified. Although *dialogue contexts* vary in the level of learning system

targeted, all learning purposes are enhanced by empathy. Learning is greatest when all three contexts are engaged simultaneously.

Applying the Model

Adult education scholars increasingly recognize a need to investigate the interrelationship of emotions, empathy, and dialogue (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). In the context of diversity, these interrelationships present practitioners with particularly complex challenges. By understanding the impact of relational power and hegemonic embeddedness, and assessing the force of emotional valence, educators can make more astute judgments about whether time should be invested in activities that generate an empathic field through whole-person dialogue. These assessments are relevant across the spectrum of dialogue contexts—whether focused on learning for individuals, group/team, or larger systems—and whether the learning goal is transformative or more modest change. In today's globally connected educational and workplace contexts, these dynamics might play out differently when the learning context involves engaging diverse cultural settings (e.g. Kim & McLean, 2014).

In the space available, we can provide only one example of how we apply the model to understanding a practical issue of practice—in this case, whether groups attempting to collaborate confront conflict or avoid it in the interest of expediency. In their analysis of tensions in one action learning program, Judy O'Neil and colleagues (1997, p. 344) describe how the tension between "maintaining harmony in order to perform the group task as opposed to surfacing and dealing with conflict" influenced group performance and inhibited deeper learning from taking place. There were four action learning groups in the program. In two groups, when someone in the group assumed power, other group members confronted the situation. These two groups ultimately produced the most innovative outcomes. In the "third group, members were reticent to assume power, and as a result they were continually dependent on the skills" of their learning coach to facilitate the process. "In the fourth group, the issue of power was raised, but the group consensually ignored the power issue, choosing instead to replicate the hierarchical relationships extant in the organizational culture." O'Neil and her colleagues hypothesize that groups that can surface and deal with conflict rooted in power relations and hierarchy were able to "think in new ways about the task, and as a result, could learn at deeper levels." The tension between harmony and group conflict personifies the paradox of diversity. When group members self-censor their participation for the sake of preserving harmony, the group misses the opportunity to benefit from the fullness of what those members' different perspectives might have contributed. Among these four action learning groups, the two that dealt directly with diversity in relational power realized their potential for innovative outcomes and for reflection on the impact of their broader culture.

The above example illustrates how the model is relevant for action learning theory and how using the model to describe and facilitate reflection can be a way of surfacing what is subjective in the minds of participants into "objective" content for reflection and learning. The same would apply to communities of practice and other collaborative group settings.

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