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## Recommended Citation

Tisdell, Elizabeth J.; Tolliver, Derise; and Villa, Silvia (2001). "Toward a Culturally Relevant and Spiritually Grounded Theory of Teaching for Social Transformation and Transformational Learning," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2001/papers/73>

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## **Toward a Culturally Relevant and Spiritually Grounded Theory of Teaching for Social Transformation and Transformational Learning**

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**Abstract: This paper explores what spirituality offers to teaching for social transformation and cultural relevance. We ground our discussion in and beyond the adult education literature, and in our experience as three women of different race and ethnic identities who bring elements of spirituality to our own practice.**

*I am Elizabeth, woman -- white, blanca. I am educator - from the Latin, e' ducare, meaning "to lead out," to lead to larger truth, and to see the truth of others' leading out. I am nomad - moving across many miles, muchos lugares, crossing borders to ever changing forms of cultural relevance.*

**Derise -- African**, woman learner, healer, wanderer. *Helping to remember*, part of the One Universe. A creation of the Almighty- my parents' daughter. The beauty, creativity, wisdom, strength and potential of all my Ancestors flow through my veins. Because they were, **I AM.**

**I am, Yo soy, Silvia.** I dream, cry and smile in Spanglish. Sometimes I wonder if I am supposed to learn, teach or educate. Engaging in this dialectic makes me feel alive. I am transgressing. I am *concientizada*... grounded and blessed by the spiritual aura of *Tonantzin*<sup>1</sup> who has survived over 500 years of genocide in the soul of my people.

We begin with this opening poem because it tells you something of who we are and our own process; it also hints at some of what we believe is important to the work of social transformation. We are three women of different cultural backgrounds who are all attempting to teach for cultural relevance and social change in the context of higher education. We attempt to challenge systems of oppression and to reach across borders of difference based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, first by staying grounded in our own cultural background and identity. Secondly, we believe that social transformation cannot happen by strictly engaging in rational discussion about culture, gender, or class; engaging people's hearts and souls, their affect and spirit, are also essential. Thus, there is an important place for spirituality in discussions of teaching for social transformation. We began with a collaborative poem because poetry is one medium (among many) that engages our hearts and spirits as well as our minds. It opens us up to ways of knowing on deeper levels, that we believe is partially a spiritual process. The work of social transformation requires that we transform ourselves and our society on levels, beyond (but

including) the rational. How can we do this in higher education contexts, and what is the place of spirituality and other ways of knowing in trying to teach for social transformation? *This paper is an attempt to expand on discussions of emancipatory adult education, by exploring what spirituality might offer to teaching for social change and for culturally relevant education.*

### **Adult Education on Spirituality, Culture and Social Transformation**

Until recently there had been little discussion about how spirituality informs adult learning generally, or how it relates to social justice and culturally relevant adult education. This is why we began pursuing this as an area of further research and theorizing. We had been participating in or teaching adult education classes that deal with gender, race, and class for nearly a decade, classes that are both exciting and controversial. The most transformative times have been when something unexpected has happened, when a barrier was transcended. Such learning resulted not only from rational discussion, or even affective consideration; it often included a dimension that seemed related to symbolic unconscious learning processes. These "breakthrough" moments often had a spiritual quality to them.

While the literature pertaining to spirituality and social justice adult education has been lacking, there is certainly literature that examines transformative approaches to education generally. Probably the best known in adult education is Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, which emphasizes critical reflection on assumptions and changing behaviors as a result of a disorienting dilemma. For Mezirow, and those who rely on his work, the unit of analysis is *the individual*, the apparent assumption being that social transformation is the sum of the parts, where the parts are transformed individuals. Many have critiqued Mezirow's work as being more a theory of individual rather than social transformation and is more driven by the role of rationality and critical reflection in challenging underlying beliefs. Yet Mezirow's work and those who rely on it have made an enormous contribution to the myriad ways in which individuals may undergo a transformed perspective.

Perhaps because Mezirow's theory seems to be more about individual transformation, a second body of literature in the field has focused more on how to teach to challenge power relations based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, dis/ability. This literature is more informed by feminist and critical pedagogy, and the critical multicultural literature. These discussions focus on an analysis of power relations between dominant and oppressed groups, and apparently assume structural social change will result when power relations are confronted and challenged. A strength of this literature is that it does indeed focus on the analysis of and challenge of power built in to social structures. Yet, because many of these approaches have focused on the educational needs of multiple groups of adults, both the needs of individuals and particular groups have become obscured. This has resulted in the development of a a third and related body of literature-more specifically on culturally relevant forms of adult education (eg. Guy, 1999) that more directly deals with the educational needs of specific cultural groups. These discussions of cultural relevance focus less overtly on the work of "social transformation" (in those terms). Nevertheless, the assumption of this body of literature appears to be that society improves (and is transformed) when the educational and economic needs of various groups are dealt with in a culturally appropriate way.

There is a limited and emerging base of research in the field that suggests that spirituality strongly informs the work of many activist adult educators (as discussed by Tisdell, 2000). Our own more recent work has explored the connection of spirituality to culture and emancipatory education efforts. Yet such theory building efforts need further development. As co-authors of this paper, we turn to a consideration of our further experience and insights of authors outside the field of adult education relating spirituality and cultural identity development that offer new direction for how one might draw on spirituality without imposing a religious or spiritual agenda.

### **Attending to the Sacred Face: The Work of David Abalos**

We have found inspiration in the work of David Abalos (1998) who argues that in order for social transformation to happen both individuals and cultural groups need to explore the mechanisms imposed by cultural hegemony and colonialism that have impacted their *four faces*: the personal face, the historical face, the political face, and the sacred face. Furthermore individuals and cultural groups need to, in *reclaiming these four faces*, incorporate other ways of knowing grounded in cultural and spiritual experience, such as through music, art, and poetry grounded in their cultural identity. His model offers some direction for culturally relevant adult education and makes spirituality apparent in the consideration of the "sacred face".

In explaining why Abalos's model is culturally relevant and transformative to me as a Mexicana/Chicana and as an educator, I (Silvia Villa) would like to share some of my own journey through education. I was 18 years old when I first came across Paulo Freire's (1971) work, which invited me to begin to analyze my own educational experience. This was a painful and a joyful process, where I recognized both the liberation and confinement, the power and powerlessness imposed by the educational system. The conflicting experiences in my education have led me to continue searching for my creative, liberating and revolutionizing self. Becoming aware of the dynamics of a banking model of education and the oppressor/oppressed relationships became the fundamental basic questions for shaping my current educational paradigm. This powerful dialectic came across in my life at the same time I entered a four-year institution, which constantly asked me, on the admission application and other forms, to check off "Hispanic", a term imposed by the government that had little to do with my own identity. I did not know better, as at the time I hadn't claimed my own identity, or the four faces that Abalos describes. Then when I read Freire, I began the journey of claiming my own identity; his work summoned me to answer the basic question of identity, "who am I?". Up until then, I was whatever the system wanted me to be: conquered. Freire gave me the tools to intellectually challenge that generally oppressive ideology imposed by many and accepted by others like me. However, as I transformed and questioned the system as it affected me, I also knew I needed to seek social change and justice for others like me. Eventually I came across the work of David Abalos (1998), whose theory and practice is based initially on Freire's emancipatory pedagogy.

Abalos (1998) sets his theory of transformation as theatrical drama of our lives in which we encounter different experiences with different acts and scenes that have the potential of leading us into the development of partial selves, defined by others. This is based on the nine-recorded possible human relationships in the history of humanity. These are emanation, subjection, buffering, isolation, direct bargaining, autonomy, incoherence, deformation and transformation. Transformation is the only process that can liberate one from being trapped in a partial self

defined by others. In order for transformation to occur, we need to engage all parts of ourselves, all four faces (personal, historical, political, and sacred). First, we need to recognize or reclaim our personal face (become conscious of our being in relation to society). The spiritual or sacred face is our actual encounter with living underlying patterning forces which we experience as the process of creativity, of being overwhelmed, of deep attraction or as courage in the face of great danger. His theory is that as we confront our assumptions, and examine our history, by engaging the personal and sacred faces we move to the political. We achieve transformation when we empty ourselves of the faces constructed by others, and claim our own four faces to become more human, which is the goal of a spiritually grounded life. Especially important is the sacred face in that it summons transformation: "To enact this relationship [of transformation] is to know that we can participate in fundamentally new and better dramas and relationships. We can create, nourish, allow to die and recreate new forms of the relationships to deal with new problems and thus woo new combinations into being" (p. 27).

### **Attending to Spirituality and Cultural Identity**

**As a woman of African descent, I (Derise Tolliver) remember a childhood of being** ashamed of the African "natives" who were portrayed as uncivilized cannibals in the Tarzan movies I watched every week. I remember the transition from being colored to Negro to Black to African-American, and the changing notions of Self at each phase. I remember the nourishment of the Black Power movement to my racial and cultural identity, an identity that has emerged into a sense of connection to others and entitlement to a birthright of freedom, justice, and access to opportunity. In more recent years, I have more consciously sought to reclaim my African heritage. Going through an adult rites of passage program based on the worldview of the Akan people of Ghana, as well as sojourning to the African continent, I have reclaimed what, on some level, I always knew, as important truths for me: Oneness with the Creator; the value of harmony, balance and order in my life; the importance of community; my individual identity as grounded in my cultural group identity- "I am because We are,"- the obligation to those past, present, and yet-to-come to fight against injustice and oppression.

Many aspects of my cultural development as a person of African descent are not unlike the experiences of other members of oppressed groups, whose individual growth has been a process that involves increasing affiliation with their particular cultural group. Psychologists have described this growth with numerous theories of racial and cultural identity development (eg, Helms, 1984). These theories have been based primarily on the 5-stage nigrescence model of Black identity initially described by Thomas and Cross. Succinctly, they describe how individuals move from a position of devaluation of an oppressed identity to "encountering" a situation that leads to a questioning of identity, to immersion in activities in the oppressed culture and strong antagonism against the oppressors, to embracing a new cultural self that values the previously devalued identity, to integrating the new identity into a more universal perspective (Myers et. al., 1991).

Spirituality is implied in some of the early racial/cultural identity models because of its implicitness of Spirit in the definition of self. Myers et. al. (1991), however, conceptualize identity development as a process of coming to know self as expression of Spirit, thus explicitly situating spirituality as integral to self. Identity development is seen as a continuous process of

interaction between the individual and the sociocultural milieu, a holistic approach encompassing all aspects of self, not just race or culture. It is thus more comprehensive than earlier racial identity models, and posits that oppression results in individuals perceiving themselves in limited ways, alienated from their intrinsic value and connection to others, past and present. As individuals increase their self-understanding and re-member their spiritual essence, they transcend the bondage of oppressions. This can result in action supporting social transformation.

Watts et. al. (1998) have developed a theory of sociopolitical development that addresses movement away from an oppressed position, where internalized racism and internalized oppression transitions into an increased sense of self-efficacy and a decrease in negative feelings about cultural group membership. This is also one of the themes of racial identity theory. Sociopolitical development is seen as a transformational process that reflects the emergence of a critical consciousness around oppressions and social injustices. Noting that African-American social change movements most always have rested on a strong religious or spiritual foundation, these theorists/researchers describe a stage model in which spirituality is seen as critical to liberation activity. A higher purpose fuels the drive to work for social transformation, and education is seen as critical to the personal transformation process.

Moving through the process of identity development, whether racial, cultural or sociopolitical, can be the catalyst to reclaiming the cultural, personal, sacred and political faces. Having access to other ways of knowing that are culturally and spiritually grounded (such as music, art, and ritual from indigenous African and Native American traditions) can also move the individual to social action and transformation.

### **So What Does It Look Like In Practice?**

How is it that we can draw on our spirituality in trying to teach for social transformation and cultural relevance in a way that does not impose a religious or a spiritual agenda? An important tenet we hold is that we need to bring our own authentic selves with us to the learning environment, and to be grounded in our own cultural identity, as we are usually asking learners to examine and be grounded in theirs. Claiming a positive cultural or gender identity, rather than one assigned to us by our families, childhood religious traditions, or the dominant culture, is a process involving unlearning internalized oppressions and negative beliefs about ourselves, our own cultural group, and that of others. It also means acknowledging our privilege, and examining how we might use it to be allies for others and for oppressed parts of ourselves. This is the journey of our *own naming*. It is partly a spiritual process, because we are naming what is personal, what is cultural, and claiming what is sacred for us. It gets at the structural as well because we examine how social structures of race, gender, and class have shaped our beliefs and values about appropriate roles and behaviors for ourselves and others based on what the dominant culture has taught. It is political and historical because as we learn to stand up and say "no" to forms of oppression we have experienced, we draw strength from those who have gone before us. Further, we join with others in our communities, classrooms, group associations to try to live differently and take action both for ourselves and others. It is sacred because we draw on and include conscious and unconscious meaning-making activities in the form of symbol, art, poetry, music, drama, dance, from the cultural groups represented in our learning environments.

How each of us does this in practice depends on the specific course or program, the configuration of the group, and our own positionality. We each speak briefly to this in light of these factors.

**Derise Tolliver:** Two important concepts to consider here are the intent and process of my practice as I teach. My intent is to provide a sacred space, where the learner's authentic self (culturally, spiritually, and on other levels) can show up and be honored; where they can learn, share and grow through various ways of knowing in connection with others; where it is safe to not-know and to ask questions; where they can find their own harmony and rhythm, and then, dance (because fun is so important in learning!). How I do this is by, first and foremost, bringing my walking-with-my-Ancestors, Ph.D.-having, Black-English-Vernacular-talking, bright-colors-wearing, dancing-when-I-hear-a-favorite-song self to the room. I celebrate who I am spiritually and culturally, and invite others to celebrate themselves. Because my learning and teaching are grounded in my own cultural and spiritual experiences, I use various means including, proverbs, rituals, symbols, and centering or meditative exercises to help tap into spiritual and cultural energy and power. We may pour libations to begin class, or sit in a circle; both have spiritual connotations. I use a variety of approaches to instruction-visual, written, kinesthetic, musical-to encourage learners to utilize their own preferred ways of knowing. The stimulus to transformative learning may take the form of collaboration with other learners who share responsibility for a common project. It may be the assigned readings that address issues of oppression, social justice, and power. I ask learners the same questions I ask myself: Who am I? What is my purpose? Am I fulfilling my purpose? As we discuss the assignments against the backdrop of these spiritual questions, we are often enjoined to consider larger issues of social justice, social transformation, and our obligation to be a part of struggles for liberation.

**Libby Tisdell:** My classes begin with the use of story. Stories touch our hearts and put a human face on the world of ideas. Thus students' initial assignment will include story readings, and a written assignment of analyzing aspects of their own story (with some guidelines) related to the content. I try to model this by sharing some of my own story. In particular, as a white woman trying to deal with cultural issues, I discuss pivotal points in my own ongoing understanding of what it means to be white, as a system of privilege, and how it interacts with my Irish-Catholic female cultural upbringing. We then critically analyze my story from a structural perspective. Sometimes I share a poem, or a song, that has been meaningful. My intent is to encourage students to do the same in their own writing: to use critical analysis and their creativity in analyzing their own stories relative to the larger society. I rarely use the term "spirituality"; yet, the use of art, poetry, etc. touches on the spiritual, and encourages it to be present in the classroom. Learners also generally do a collaborative teaching presentation on a particular subject. They use multiple modes of knowledge production in their presentations. Sometimes I fight a tendency to want to take over. Yet, the most transformative times have been when I get out of the way, and let students facilitate these activities without intervention. They often incorporate the spiritual and cultural as well as the affective and analytical in these presentations, that is grounded in their own cultural experience, and suggestions for social change. This insures its cultural relevance. In closing, we often make use of some of what they created throughout the course in a final activity that hints at a ritual through use of song, poetry, dance, art, and ideas from significant reading in stating our intent of next steps for action.

**Silvia Villa:** Discovering Abalos' (1998) work has enabled me to embark in a journey of transformation that not only has helped me become a fuller being, but it has summoned me to serve as a guide to others. The discovery of empowerment without transformation can only lead to a partial self. In my practice, I struggle to live every day as if it were a new beginning with the responsibility to share with others my four faces and their four faces. Therefore, as a collective we need to challenge our interactions in order to become intertwined in the sacred process of transformation. Our personal face brings together our feelings and intuitions; the political face asks what can we do together to bring about a more just society; the historical face brings about the idea of a new history, one where we the students (and all my relationships) and I are the authors of a unique story. "With our sacred face we are colleagues of the god of transformation, who invites us to participate in the persistent creation of the cosmos and our own humanity" (Abalos, 1998, p. 170).

### Summary and Conclusions

In conclusion, we believe that there is a place for spirituality in culturally relevant and emancipatory education efforts. By engaging learners on the personal, cultural, structural, political, and the artistic/spiritual levels, we believe there is greater chance that education is transformative both personally and collectively, both for learners and educators. We continue to draw on different modes of knowledge production to inform our educational work, including the literature on spirituality, and cultural identity development, and our own teaching and lived experience as three women of different race and ethnic identities. Thus, in conclusion, we end as we began: with a bit of poetry. It is not, however, based strictly on the rationalistic and individualistic assumptions of Descartes, "I think, therefore I am." Rather, it is based on the collective insight of the African proverb and spiritual traditions that we believe offers some collective wisdom for the work of social transformation: ***"I AM because WE ARE: WE ARE, therefore I AM."***

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### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Tonantzin is Nahuatl, native language of central Mexico, word for goddess of earth.