

Education in Perspective

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[This essay appears in F. Guldbrandsen's (2009) textbook entitled *The Long Road from There to Here: Foundations of American Education*.]

"Is the primary purpose of education to impart information, construct knowledge, or initiate change?" asks Ettling (2006, p. 61). I trace my visceral investment in this question back to finding myself lost as a disoriented new teacher in a distant education wilderness, seeking to understand education's primary purpose.

Gringo Perdido

Weeks after graduating from college, I was wrapping up a summer as a wilderness camp counselor and packing my bicycle saddlebags for a volunteer teaching year in Central America. The prior four years of school had made me more informed, resourceful, and engaged in intentional living than I had earlier hoped to be. I learned these things from more skillful teachers than I knew existed. And these lessons transpired in classrooms, courtyards, and cottages on both sides of the Atlantic. And so I felt prepared to sojourn to a distant rainforest school to impart information, construct knowledge, and initiate change in a second-chance secondary school for students ready to improve their lives.

But upon arrival at the humid edge of the Belizean rainforest, I began to sweat the impending reality of teaching. My early idealism faded in the face of concrete complexity. Self-doubt clouded my consciousness, as I began to realize that teaching for change—which once seemed so tidy in the abstract—now revealed itself as contextually complicated. I questioned whether I had anything meaningful to teach, let alone fostering discovery of transforming truths. I wondered whether my early optimism was perhaps founded in folly.

I spent an anxious yet alluring welcome week splitting my time between mapping curriculum and scouting the Maya Mountain range for lessons to be learned. While I envisioned for my students a far-reaching journey of academics and extracurriculars, my very own education in perspective would commence shortly thereafter—as soon as I found myself lost right in the middle of town.

My suspicions of folly were confirmed one morning on my walk to school in the early hours of that sophomore week. Rapt by the lushness of the scarlet hibiscus hedges, I followed the beauty of the long road to school that morning. The new day was fresh, and the macaws held forth from their verdant perches in the surrounding hills.

Then, in my ears came pointed words through the flowering bush; "*Gringo! Ch!ngada Gringo!*" came a child's voice with borrowed bravado.

"*Gringo! Ch!ngada Gringo!*" the voice insisted again through the now-thorny hedge. While the small *Kriol* voice found its way through the bush, his boyish body

stayed mostly hidden. My large *gringo* frame, in contrast, was whiter than the bleached clay road on which I stood scorned and disoriented.

Speechless, I tightened my backpack straps and quickened my pace to school. As I fled, I stole uneasy glances at the hiding hedge, where I saw my juvenile accuser in his brown uniform shorts and yellow collared school shirt scurrying back to the thatched-roof hut where his mother slapped the day's *maize* tortillas over a breakfast fire.

Although I had easily enough escaped the scene, I had a harder time ditching my disorientation. Had I really just been called out as an @*&#!\$% imposter by a child? Where did he learn to talk such smack? How did I become a *ch!ngada gringo*—an epithet generally reserved for the disdained white soldiers who sped recklessly atop tanks through the Maya Mountain villages? Neither a soldier nor speeding, I contrived a self-preserving litany of silent objections to the characterization.

Didn't my accuser know I was there as a teacher? That I was there to impart knowledge rather than to perpetuate ignorance? There to construct understanding rather than to fabricate fear? To initiate changes that would improve the courses of our collective existence? Didn't this neighborhood know that I was a *voluntario*, teaching for a year for free? Didn't everyone know that people deserve to be judged on the merits of their own behavior rather than by the deeds of those whom they resemble?

I'm certain that he neither knew nor cared.

So, alas, I said nothing—as nothing I could have said on that white-hot road would have changed much of anything.

White-Hot and Hollow

Feeling disoriented and spurned, I skipped breakfast and fumbled through a doubly self-conscious day playing school. I saw myself standing as a hollow *gringo perdido*—or lost whitey—in the trusting presence of my Mestizo, Kriol, Mayan, Garifuna, Aztec, Caribe, and Arawak students. That morning I traded suspicion for fact. I learned that not only was I the new and untested teacher; I was also the new and unwanted intruder. I heard it straight from the mouth of a child.

As that white-hot and hollow day turned to evening and then to night, I returned to my stilted house where I pined for peace and sleep. Finding neither, I grew weary of my self and my sojourn.

The next day, I took the short cut to school, and then continued to do so for weeks. I was all too willing to forgo the allure of the hibiscus and macaws in order to arrive at school with my self-image moderately intact—rather than mostly unraveled.

Thereafter, for weeks into months, the child's chiding voice echoed in my head on most any road I traveled. As it echoed, I began to recognize in it some perspectives that were not entirely off base. After all, I was pretty much the whitest guy around. I was oddly white, compared to my neighbors and students. I supposed

I looked at times like an off-duty soldier who was willing to get lost on most any road that invited travel. Alas, seeing myself through the eyes of my neighborhood, I reluctantly saw in myself the unwitting *gringo perdido*.

The Poison Gift of Transformation

Looking back, I recognize that the disorienting events of that poignant morning served as a gift to my development. These events initiated a transformation of my perspective of the role of teachers, students, and individuals in the context of the larger world. This poison gift of perspective transformation enabled me to simultaneously make space for equal and opposite realities. I discovered myself increasingly able to acknowledge and release my forgivably flawed and culturally inherited beliefs and behaviors in favor of increasingly accurate and justified understandings. I came to realize that gaining valuable information, constructing meaningful knowledge, and initiating sustainable change would demand personal transformation.

Transformative Learning Theory

Broadly speaking, transformative learning theory, according to Daloz (1990), describes a process of enabling proactive thinking, incorporating multiple perspectives, and encouraging dialogue and construction of knowledge. More specifically, Mezirow (2000) explains that transformative learning is a process through which learners experience a deep shift in perspective—becoming “more inclusive, differentiating, open to other viewpoints, critically reflective of assumptions, emotionally capable of change, and integrative of experience” (pp. 7-8). Brookfield (2000) suggests that through critical reflection, erroneous frames of reference—or inaccurate assumptions and points of view—become apparent. Once such inaccuracies are identified, they may be replaced by more accurate and critically aware frames of reference.

Essence of Perspective Transformation

While the rational and extra-rational dynamics of transformation are the subject of passionate debate among scholars, research conducted by Herbers (1998) has distilled the cognitive essence of transformation into four foundational phases that include: (a) disorienting dilemmas, (b) critical reflection, (c) rational dialogue, and (d) action.

In order to more clearly see these phases, let's return to my own transformative education in perspective that took place in Central America some years ago, viewing the events through these progressive phases.

Disorientation

Perspective transformation—whether gradual and incremental or sudden and epochal—is often triggered by disorienting events that create cognitive dissonance, explains Cranton (2006). Disorientation, in my own experience, came

from being called out as a *ch!ngada gringo* in my Belizean host village. Whereas I had anticipated a relationship of mutual regard, in reality, I found myself the subject of scorn. I had operated under the assumption that my own self-favorable interpretation was the primary and logical frame of reference through which to interpret my work and my existence as a volunteer teacher. Disorientation, however, asserted a contrasting interpretation.

In the hours and days thereafter, in the classroom, on the road, and out in the ancient hills, I began to catch glimpses of myself as the lost fool who had allowed a self-aggrandized interpretation of his new existence to cover a deceiving myopic view of reality. I had planned to be regarded as the trusted *hermano*. In contrast, I came to learn that I was in fact reviled as the *ch!ngada gringo*—or the current filthy vestige of cultural hegemony.

Critical Reflection

In the weeks that followed my disorientating discovery that I was considered a *gringo perdido*, I experienced a shift in perspective from which I could not return. My view of myself was transformed from forgivably flawed to self-aware and increasingly informed. I discovered that my new reality demanded that I acknowledge equal and opposite truths from those I had known in other contexts. Over time, I grew to trust that I could seek what Mezirow (2000) describes as more accurate, permeable, and differentiating perspectives without losing my history, my identity, or myself.

According to Brookfield (2000) the process that enables disorienting dilemmas to foster perspective transformation is called “critical self reflection on assumptions” in order to understand the “culturally contingent. . . tacit, and unproblematized” thoughts and expectations that are “socially created and learned” (pp. 131-33). Critical self reflection on my own assumptions as a teacher and a traveler revealed that while I was aware of multiple and conflicting perspectives, through my own limited frames of reference I uncritically validated some while tacitly discounting others.

Reflecting on my folly, I grew to understand myself as existing in the midst of conflicting yet valid realities. Critical reflection suggested that I attempt to understand contrasting views and practices through both emic—or inside—perspectives as well as from etic—or outside—perspectives. In short, I developed my capacity to be at variance with myself, and to be enriched by multiple and conflicting interpretations.

Disorientation, followed by committed critique of my assumptions, revealed that my previously held and unexamined beliefs about imparting information, constructing knowledge, and initiating change were, in fact, an insufficient match for my new reality. As a result of this perspective transformation, I got to retain a good deal of whom I was. But I also got to release a bunch of ignorance and inauthenticity—in the form of unexamined assumptions. In doing so, I gained an

emerging ability to simultaneously acknowledge and critique my culturally bound habits of mind.

Rational Dialogue

In the months thereafter, my *gringo* existence became purposively problematized, and foundational questions about who I was and what I was doing became more frequent. I learned to meet answers with questions that sought not cleverness but instead clarity. My teachers—who ranged from my insightful peers to community sages—helped me acknowledge and become un beholden to the beliefs that had formerly dictated my thought and behavior.

Rational dialogues with my teachers allowed me to recognize my folly. I was interpreting unfamiliar experiences through familiar frames of reference.

Through dialogue, I learned that part of the folly lay in assuming that imperfect strangers would share accurate and complementary notions of each other's existence. I realized it was folly to assume that the kid who labeled me the *ch'ngada gringo* and I would share the same lily-white assessment of my foreign presence in his neighborhood.

Another part of my folly, I learned through rational dialogue, was failing to acknowledge the varying and often-thorny associations that different individuals have with school. Does it exist to impose or impart information? To contradict or construct meaningful knowledge? To obstruct or initiate constructive change? For whom? And to what extent are these experiences universal?

A further dimension of the folly was my mistaken assumption that conflict in community building was, by nature, unconstructive. And so I was operating in a demanding environment under the naive assumption that right intention would bring right effort. I had not learned the noble truth that with striving comes suffering, and so my suffering brought disillusionment instead of right view.

In the weeks, months, and years thereafter, rational dialogue taught me to view disorientation and conflict from a different set of perspectives—namely that conflict and adversity could be as constructive as I chose these to be. What mattered most was what I chose to do with the complexity.

Action

In the semesters that followed, I learned to learn from disorientation. While my mistakes certainly did not cease, my process for making sense of these mistakes changed fundamentally. Following the lead of my teachers, I learned to process cognitive dissonance through critical reflection, and in doing so found opportunities for perspective critique that allowed me to survive—and in some cases thrive—in the midst of the complexities that are as predictable as they are difficult throughout education and life.

Over the course of those formative semesters, I continued to find myself revealed as a *gringo perdido*. Yet in contrast to that sophomore week, I learned that I could step outside of myself and laugh about the feelings of embarrassment and

self-loathing that come with being called out as lost. It's not that I blew off my mistakes, but instead I chose to critique my own unwarranted expectations to perform flawlessly in the midst of uncertainty.

I learned to meet the cognitive dissonance of disorienting dilemmas with critical reflection. I learned lessons in rational dialogue from my teachers who guided me toward greater clarity in thought and action. I learned to value—while imperfectly practicing—listening with suspended judgment, which may require a lifetime of practice.

In the end, perspective transformation taught me how to grow authentically as an acknowledged *gringo perdido* in that Maya Mountain village. Perspective transformation led me to appreciate and value the insights I gained from seeing myself and the world through the eyes—as well as the conflicting value systems of many—including the trash-talking, hedge-whisperer on the long road to school.

Had perspective transformation not taught me how to learn, I'd have taken off, checked out, or gone through the motions—playing school until my time was up. In doing so, I would have been hiding from myself and from the demands of my future. These demands would surely include skillful negotiation of disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection on the tacit assumptions hidden in conflicting perspectives, rational dialogue on boundless opportunities, and conscientious action. In short, I'd have been hiding from—rather than transformed by—life.

Blessed Beyond Reason (Not the Sharpest Tool)

In the decades since being called out as an unwitting *gringo*, I've been blessed beyond reason in the form of my family and the larger community in which I live and work. And now, when in my memory I hear the echo of my *Kriol* teacher giving me an education in perspective calling me a *gringo*, I'm happy to nod and acknowledge my young teacher's lesson.

Yet the lessons of a transformed perspective remain to direct me in negotiating the current complexities of life. Finn (2006) refers to these complexities as the crushing and colossal expectations of authentic living in mind, body, and soul in a culturally complex world. In relationship to these expectations, the ability to meet disorienting dilemmas with critical reflection, rational dialogue, and informed action may just be the difference between surviving and thriving.

And as my wise, loving grandmother has reminded me (on multiple occasions, in the presence of my children) out of all her grandchildren, I'm certainly not the sharpest tool in the shed. So, consider this observation from my grandmother: If this *gringo perdido* can learn how to learn, who then cannot find their way through a transforming education in perspective?

Perspectives On Transformation

For individuals of my generation, effectively negotiating life's disorientating dilemmas may be perceived as a blessing or a desired qualification for success. Yet effective negotiation of cognitive and relational dissonance will be an essential

qualification and a required skill for current and future generations of students, teachers, and citizens living in what Friedman (2007) asserts is a flattened and super-connected world.

Marx, (2002) underscores this reality in noting, "Major global, demographic, technological, assessment and cultural trends are shaking the foundations of society as we have known it. Nowhere will these seismic shifts have greater impact than in our schools." (p. 1). Achieving an integrated and transformative education is not only possible, but it is necessary for effective and engaged citizenship, through what the American Association of Colleges and Universities calls "Integrated learning, including synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems" (2008, p. 3). In these contexts, Etting's (2006) question "Is the primary purpose of education to impart information, construct knowledge, or initiate change?" might well be met with an affirmative response to all of the above.

Fostering Perspective Transformation

If education is to impart, inform, and initiate change, it might well scaffold the research-based conditions that support transformative learning. These conditions according to Daloz (2000) include: (a) the presence of others who embody difference, (b) reflective discourse regarding the differing assumptions of each, (c) a community of mentorship, and (d) opportunities for committed action.

Cranton (2006) has identified study of self, others, relationships, context, and leading a critical life as key factors in transformative classrooms. "Although transformative learning is stimulated by any event or experience that calls into question our habitual expectations about ourselves and the world around us" explains Cranton, "when a person is engaged in a serious dialogue with someone she knows, likes, and trusts, the potential for examination of previously uncritically absorbed values and assumptions, is I suggest, much greater" (p. 12).

At what age are students understood to be capable of the cognitive demands of critical reflection? Kegan (2000) identified adulthood as the precipitous age for perspective transformation, as individuals are in adulthood equipped with experience and metacognitive abilities to scrutinize uncritically assumed perspectives about the world. Kegan explains that in adulthood, one goes from being psychologically "written by" the socializing process to "writing upon it," a shift from a socialized self to a self authoring epistemology, in the lingo of constructive-developmental theory (2000, p. 59).

Moreover, Perry (1970) advanced understanding of transformative andragogy—or adult education—through his stage theory about the nature of learning among college students. Perry's four main stages include dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment. Dualism means thinking in either-or terms, which can be developed by engaging learners in the search for multiple valid choices. Multiplicity means viewing knowledge in subjective terms, which can be

developed by asking learners to differentiate between well-supported and weakly supported ideas. Relativism means constructing knowledge from a variety of perspectives, and can be developed by asking learners to engage in mindfully evaluating the consequences of ideas and choices. Commitment means accepting an ongoing role of journeying toward understanding of complex ideas and perspectives. In this stage, the learner accepts responsibility for the dynamic contexts, interpretations, and consequences in a pluralistic world.

While transformative learning experiences have indeed been identified as taking place in intercultural travel experiences such as my own Central American teaching experience, my research with contemporary college students suggests that students are experiencing perspective transformation in higher education through classroom interactions, campus events, and field experiences (Glisczinski, 2005). While these experiences are divergent in terms of sources of cognitive dissonance, they converge in being fostered by environments that provide students with the perception of a golden mean of genuine support and hospitable dissonance (Glisczinski, 2008). Transformation is thus supported by inviting individuals to engage in responsible risk-taking in environments that scaffold critical analysis, constructive dialogue, and committed action.

Conclusion: Education In Perspective

So that's my story. A decade and a half ago, I set out to work as a new teacher in a distant rainforest village intent to impart information, construct knowledge, and initiate change on behalf of my students. What I experienced, however, was a transforming personal change. The education in perspective was mine.

I offer this story to you as a student, teacher, or stakeholder in education for your reflection. If, upon further consideration, you reason that the principles of transformative learning explained herein might well serve students and society, I encourage you to further read and discuss these opportunities for authentic learning.

I encourage you as students and teachers—cognizant of the demands the world will surely place on its citizens—to answer for yourselves Etting's (2006) ponderous question "Is the primary purpose of education to impart information, construct knowledge, or initiate change?" (p.61.)

However we each answer this question, there are a few things that we think we collectively know. We know that if information is to be imparted, this information must be informed by multiple, divergent realities. In its absence, we're studying only part of the story. We know that if knowledge is to be constructed, this knowledge must be critically examined, lest our perspectives be inaccurate. And we know that if education is to initiate change, the change must invest in each individual's authentic transformation.

Anything less may be an education in need of perspective.

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