Embracing Differences through Dialogue and Engaged Learning

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Abstract
This paper presents the elements of an engaged learning experience, with the aim of embracing differences through a pedagogical lens that uses dialogue as a process and content. A qualitative exploratory case study was conducted that included a structured dialogue methodology. Class dynamics and engagement from an online classroom of 30 Japanese and international students represented a microcosm of society. The structured dialogue included three-key participants – the professor, a graduate student, and a facilitator. The key findings revealed a four-stage Embracing Differences Change Model based on the themes of conformity, vulnerability, exploration, and learning. Eight actions for embracing difference are presented based on the key elements of sharing, listening, personalizing, and creating.

Keywords: Engaged Learning, Dialogue, Humanism, Critical Inquiry

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The International Academic Forum
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Introduction

The year 2020 forced dramatic changes across society, and within higher education. The impact of the pandemic posed acute and long-term effects, reaching across a broad section of society, including work, family, and school. The personal impact on loss and restrictions changed how young adults are experiencing major developmental milestones such as graduations, job hunting, and relationships; all contributing to a difficult transition into adulthood (Powell, 2020). The impact is also changing how students experience higher education. With the threat of a pandemic caused by Covid-19, universities in Japan quickly shifted to emergency remote learning in April, the start of a new academic year. Japanese students, engaged in study abroad, returned to Japan, and international students who returned to their home countries took classes remotely, along with domestic Japanese classmates, via Zoom. The challenges of adjusting to online instruction were compounded by separation from friends, and a disconnect from participation in a living and learning community on campus.

Simultaneously, social activism in the United States encapsulated by the Black Lives Matter movement revealed deep schisms in the historical and current discrimination and institutional racism against Blacks, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). The pandemic and social movement for justice brought to the forefront an opportunity to address the human divisions that exist in society, locally and globally, within the arena of higher education. The value of creating an inclusive and equitable environment on university campuses has been recognized, although credible and authentic change has been slow in taking hold (Pasquerella, 2016). Therefore, at the intersection of the pandemic and the social justice movement, the challenge was to create an engaged learning experience for university students attending classes online, where assumptions could be juxtaposed against new ways of thinking about the 'other.'

This paper presents an exploratory case study of a teaching and learning experience based on a model of engaged learning, focused on fostering dialogue as a pedagogical strategy of transformation with the aim of embracing differences. The literature review presents the theoretical model of praxis and humanism as a lens for creating a context to engage differences. The case study is presented from the perspective of three key participants, engaged in a dialogic model of analysis. Findings present a model capturing the process of engagement, along with eight actions for embracing differences.

Literature Review

How can the learning experience embrace a process of transformation? To reach this outcome, it becomes necessary to turn to educational pedagogies centered on praxis and humanism (Burger, 2019; Freire, 1998; Palmer, 1998; Torres, 2014). Freire (1973) espoused the importance of the purpose of education, moving from a transactional banking model where students are blank slates waiting to be filled with teacher's information; to a praxis pedagogy where students and educators are both transformed through the impact on one another. Based on the key ideas of freedom, democracy, and critical participation (Gadotti & Torres, 2014), Freire's pedagogy directly responds to his question, "for what reasons do I practice education" (1998, p. 46)? In this study, this defining question is then coupled with the caveat, how can this

experience be created when emergency online teaching is the mode of delivery, as opposed to face-to-face teaching?

Freire's educational pedagogy is aimed at social change, explicitly recognizing that education is not neutral, and thus, scholarship and activism are deeply connected in purpose. He also describes the persona of the educator. For Freire, "critical intellectuals should live passionately their own ideas, building spaces of deliberation and tolerance in their quest for knowledge and empowerment. They love what they do, and they love those with whom they interact" (Torres, 2014, p. 113). To create spaces of deliberation, building a community of trust allows for questions to emerge (Burger, 2019; Palmer, 1998). Palmer shared, "The courage to teach is the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that [you] can be woven into the fabric of community..." (p. 11). Like Freire and Parker, Wiesel's goal of teaching is to humanize, and he shared with his students, "Whatever you learn, remember: the learning must make you more, not less, human." (Burger, 2019, p. 26)

When an educational pedagogy centers on praxis and humanism, the work of embracing differences necessitates creating a learning space of deliberation, that connects head and heart. An exchange between students and the professor that fosters new ways of thinking of the other, with a goal of expanding one's perspective. Burger (n.d.) shared, "When we examine our assumptions and ask difficult questions about our beliefs and behaviors, when we practice humility, we can avoid the traps of demonizing others, which so many of us seem to fall into" (p. 2). Palmer's definition of the 'other' involves appreciation, recognizing that a stranger has much to teach us (2005). To advance in embracing differences, Palmer states that there is a, "need to become discerning and doubtful about stereotypes" (p. 21).

Based on Freire's belief that students develop a critical awareness of the world based on the concrete experience of their everyday lives, the development of critical awareness serves to transform the learning experience (Guajardo, in press). Thus, the process of knowing is relational, and engaging in dialogue is a pathway for learning. The work of personalizing current events, and the history of discrimination, is necessary in order to forge a connection to social change. The awareness and skills needed to relate to the 'other' calls for this educational engagement to be relevant to the students' lives. The importance of relevance counteracts the concept of subtractive schooling, and requires validating racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural realities and ways of knowing (Caldwell, 2004; Valenzuela, 2017).

Guajardo (in press) shares, "In the classroom, the process of dialogue can be used to engage students to become curious about the world, about issues, and to connect with themselves and others; to begin to form [a] bridge." Dialogue as a pedagogical strategy is more than conversation. Freire viewed dialogue as transformational, not as an act of verbal ping pong. Rather, dialogue was a pathway for learning that involved reflection (Freire, 1973). Teaching students how to engage in dialogue is an intentional strategy, along with how to practice listening, engage in reflection, and learning how to share. Through this process of dialogue, students learn how to be authentic. This authenticity leads to strengthened relationships that emerge from dialogues where there is sustained, constructive tension. Palmer states that the work necessitates "hold[ing] perhaps the most subtle and yet most difficult tension of all:

the tension between reality and possibility...standing in the tragic gap, the gap between our knowledge of what is and our knowledge of what might be" (2005, p. 27). In the work of embracing differences, we are reaching to move beyond realities and toward possibilities.

With the goal of creating an engaged learning experience to address embracing differences through dialogue, three research questions were posed for this exploratory case study.

Research Questions

1.   What elements of an engaged learning experience lead to embracing differences?
2.   How can one challenge assumptions about self and the other?
3.   What is the role of dialogue as a process and as content?

Methodology

Thirty Japanese and international students - undergraduates, graduates, and alumni from 12 countries engaged in a 14-week course. The formation of small groups, called Tribes, were consistent groupings of 4-6 students that remained intact for six weeks. Tribes engaged in small group discussions 1-2 times per class and worked on joint projects. Content themes in the course, including democracy, dialogue, community, creativity, power, and freedom were the base upon which to build new, and innovative perspectives related to differences in culture, beliefs, values, and language.

This exploratory case study relied on three key informants: the professor, a graduate student assistant, and a facilitator. Their roles are shared in the key informant perspective below and presented in first person. Initially, weekly reflections on the class process, class dynamics, and challenges, revealed insights related to the impact of creating an experience for engaged learning. At the completion of the course, a dialogic process (Bradley, 2017) between two dialogue partners, or key informants, guided by a facilitator, captured the process of transformation and engaged learning that was experienced in the course.

The dialogue partners and the facilitator, individually, and then collectively, identified pedagogical elements that surfaced through the course experience. These elements were summarized as engaged learning, reflection, developing agency, critical inquiry, and the strengthening of relationships. These elements served as the basis for the development of questions that would be utilized in a 2 and ½ hour structured dialogue, intended to explore the process of change that had occurred in the course. The dialogue partners were the professor and the student assistant, with a designated facilitator. The structured dialogue was recorded and transcribed. The content was analyzed for themes and process of change.

Key Informants' Perspectives

Swati Vohra – Facilitator

As a participant of the Democracy and Dialogue course that began under unprecedented circumstances, I did not anticipate the impact experienced in the face of an online format where Zoom became a space for experiential learning. Class assignments had a newfound meaning and value - reading to reflect personally, sharing to connect, listening to understand, and learning to practice. Earnestness of pre-class preparation through weekly reflection assignments allowed personal engagement with the content, and this was reflected in class contributions. In class, the engagement extended to other students, especially within the tribe discussions. I self-identified as a facilitator within my tribe, creating a space that included everyone's voices and at the same time as a bridge, desiring to connect to others. The inner transformation sparked curiosity to retrace and unpack the different phases of engagement within the class. For me, inquiry emerged in wanting to understand the cognizance of one's agency, help in embracing differences, the role of critical inquiry and the balance between identities of self and others in tribes. I considered myself a class student/participant first, and my role as a facilitator for the structured dialogue benefitted highly as a result. Overall, it added greater depth and meaning to the dialogic process.

Mandeep Taneja - Dialogue Partner/Student Assistant

It was fortuitous to be both a student and a student assistant through the course. The opportunity allowed me to participate with the students, be part of a tribe, and engage in collaborative creative activities. Additionally, while supporting technically, I interacted with the Professor before and after the class. I had a sneak preview of class structure and assignments' objectives before the class began and reflected on the learnings and experience from multiple perspectives at the conclusion of each class. Thus, I was present in the evolving dynamics, both as a class participant and as a student assistant, learning and reflecting on how the class was structured. These multiple perspectives contributed to our structured dialogue and our learnings contributed to the engaged-learning model.

Maria Guajardo - Dialogue Partner/Professor

The prospect of teaching online was daunting and challenged every fiber in my body. As I stumbled through the initial classes I understood that the fundamental building blocks of my teaching needed to be translated into a synchronous teaching experience of engaged learning. My passion for social justice connected deeply with my belief that students needed to connect to their personal, cultural narrative, and then reach across to their classmate on the computer screen - the question was how to create this experience.

Conclusions

Main Findings

Four themes emerged from an analysis of the dialogue; themes that described the stages of change observed and experienced in the class. The four stages were Conformity, Vulnerability, Exploration, and Learning. Transitioning from one stage to the next involved one of three agents of change: trust, deep dive, and respect for self and others. Students began the class in the conformity stage. Then, through the class experience that included a dialogue process, students moved to a stage of vulnerability, then exploration, and then the final stage of learning. As students transitioned through the stages, the agents of change were evident and appeared to allow for the transition from one stage to the next. The structure of this change model is presented in Figure 1.
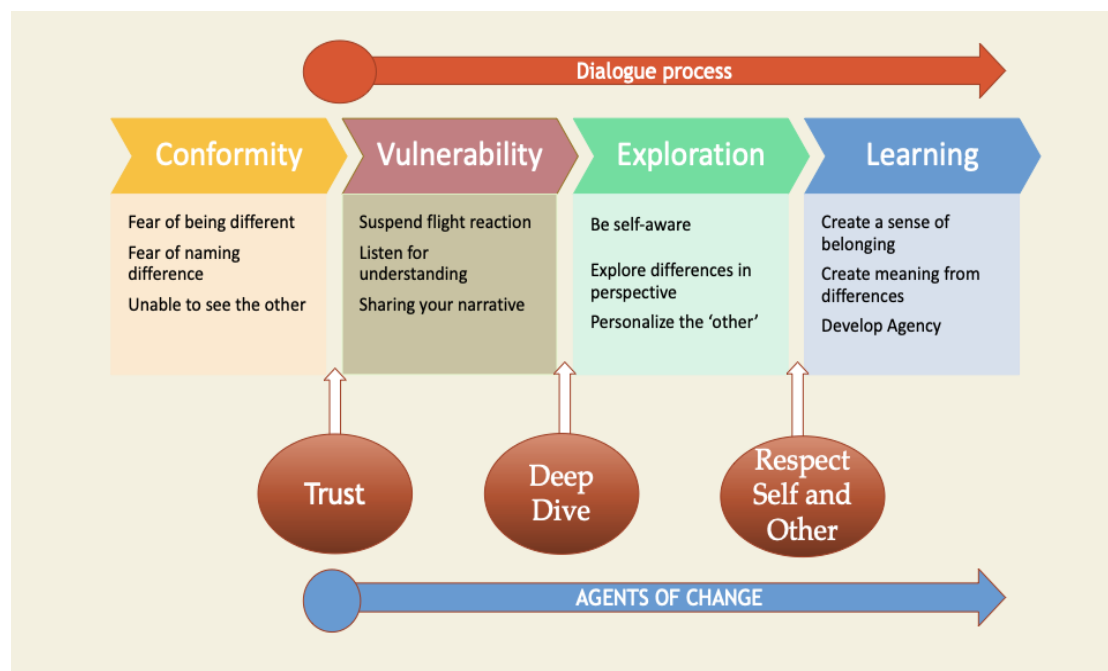

Figure 1: Stages of Embracing Differences Change Model

1. Conformity Stage. The first stage in the process of embracing differences begins with a pull towards conformity. This stage reflects a desire to conform, to not verbally express or name differences between individuals. It is an avoidance or inability to see the differences in the 'other.' Conformity becomes a challenge in embracing diversity, where there is a fear of the unknown, and a fear of being vulnerable.

Discussion on controversial topics featured differences among classmates, and a pathway for embracing differences emerged. Creating a learning space for critical thinking was encouraged through questions that were posed in pre-class assignments, often tapping into a student's lived experience. In the structured dialogue Guajardo shared, "My challenge was to form questions that would allow students to connect to their own experience. I want to hear students' voices sharing who they are and what matters to them." Students were empowered to ask questions. To encourage curiosity in class, students were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers. Guajardo posed the question, "When you don't feel cornered to answer correctly, can a sense of

curiosity be developed?" To move from the Conformity stage to the stage of Vulnerability, students needed to develop trust. Trust was identified as a change agent.

Change Agent - Trust

Swati Vohra – Facilitator

Trust for me first showed up in my tribe where one of us took the lead to share our personal reflections/experiences in relation to the class readings. The catalyst to this was observing a professor who led and exemplified the way. Listening to others intimate narratives alleviated one's adherence to standards of guardedness. I wasn't the only one who challenged through the seclusion of 'being different/socially non-confirmative.' An implicit trust was built through such exchanges that permeated the class, making me secure, and opening a path that allowed me to discover myself. The class was a perfect example of a nurturing field where ideas, creativity and co-creation flourished. Sharing happened as a genuine desire to reflect, connect with others, and develop mutually without vying for a position. It was for the first time that I experienced and recognized vulnerability as power which was embodied by both, the students as much as by the professor. This, however, wouldn't have happened if the discussion themes were placed at a safe distance from us.

In one of our tribe discussions, we were reflecting on the theme of 'exclusion' looking through our past experiences. The stories grew personal with each sharing, until the last member in my tribe, who, as she narrated her story of exclusion, broke down leaving all of us pensive.

This class is where I have experienced unconditional trust, shared laughter, worries, anxieties, tears without a fear of judgement. One of the most empowering realizations has been to own who 'I am' with all my flaws and my power.

2. Vulnerability Stage. In the second stage in the process of embracing differences, as the dialogue process allows for trust to develop, individuals allow themselves to experience vulnerability. This involves suspending one's flight reaction and learning to share one's narrative. Dialogue exercises required students to listen for understanding, not to formulate a response; and to learn how to share their own narrative. Through the class dialogue exercise conducted in dyads, students had an opportunity to share their narrative, to be seen by the other. Personalizing the dialogue allowed students to both be vulnerable and to develop trust with their classmates.

One underlying assumption of the teaching and learning modeled in the class was that learning should not be competitive. Team assignments reflected community collaboration. The virtual classroom was a learning laboratory that made it safe to see individual differences. Without stripping students of their individual strengths, the goal was to reflect a global community and create connections that were not based on competition, but a community built on the strengths of the individual and the collective. Guajardo shared, "The strength of diversity comes from being able to say who you are, being able to share your personal narrative [because] everyone has a narrative." To move from the stage of Vulnerability to the third stage of Exploration, students needed to go deep in reflection to connect with their own narrative. By doing

this deep dive into self-awareness, allowed students to then explore the differences between themselves and others.

Change Agent - Deep Dive

Mandeep Taneja - Dialogue Partner/Student Assistant

The final assignment as a tribe was to dialogue on a controversial topic presenting both sides of the argument, motivating an experience exemplifying the transition between the stages of Vulnerability and Exploration. As the topic had to be chosen by students themselves, there were discussions on a wide array of issues. In my tribe, we started by discussing euthanasia and nuclear weapons; however, either side of the argument was acceptable. The change emerged when we discussed topics personal to us, like animal consumption versus environmental crises, and connected with being vegetarian or non-vegetarian. We had both perspectives present in our tribes, and the dialogue led to cross-examining our opinions. For example, while India was presumed a vegetarian country, I was not. Another tribemate had chosen to be vegan due to environmental reasons. This dialogue experience led us to explore each other's personalities and then do a deep dive into examining our diverse opinions on a seemingly simple topic impacted by culture, personal experience, and education.

Maria Guajardo - Dialogue Partner/Professor

At the beginning of class I explained to my students that my job is to teach in a way that allows them to connect head and heart. When content and knowledge find a way to their personal interests and experience, I know that the relevance of the learning experience will sustain their interest. This provides the students an opening to go deeper within the experience of learning. Posing questions prior to class are intended to challenge students to connect to the material in a personal way, asking them to voice their opinions on broad topics connected to ethics, power, and racism. While at the same time I am asking them to think about other questions such as, how does culture shape the way you view the world? I also recognize that this deep dive creates an opening to connect to the memories and emotions connected to time and space.

3. Exploration Stage. The third stage in the process of embracing differences is exploration. This stage entails self-awareness, exploring differences in perspective, and personalizing the 'other.' At the root of embracing differences is an understanding of the collective identity versus the individual identity. Within tribes, students were intentionally presented with opportunities to define their individual identity, and then also asked to form and define a group identity. The balance between 'We' and 'I' demonstrated the idea of a global community that is defined by both. The Ubuntu saying, *I am because we are, and we are because I am*, was introduced to underscore the need for self-definition and the concept of interdependence. The professor's role was to consciously role model, encourage, and nurture the value of "I" and "We" through student engagement and class structure. To move from the Exploration stage to the fourth stage, Learning, students needed to embody respect for themselves and for others.

Change Agent - Respect self and others

Swati Vohra – Facilitator

There was an unparalleled depth to the journey of self-exploration and awareness throughout the course. It brought to light my internalization of other's interpretation of my identity as a complex being with a negative connotation. It weighed on me and I wrested through, trying to reject aspects of self. The process of dialogue and reflection – what has shaped me, my beliefs and my worldview revealed an intricate interconnection of culture, values, experiences, and encounters. The understanding that every perspective had a story and we needed to delve deeper, began to make me comfortable and respect myself. It was not merely an intellectual understanding, however, a living reality experienced through the class. Because everyone has their journey, it was also present for others in my tribe.

Noticeable differences emerged among the students within my tribe as we conducted a dialogue on, "Should women join the workforce post maternity?" The topic for dialogue was personally close to all the tribe members and everyone had their own perspectives that made some of us uncomfortable. However, since it was a dialogue and not a debate to win, each participant was committed to go deeper into understanding, to learn about the source of those perspectives without attempting to force a change. The culmination of our dialogue resulted in one student, who had initially voiced strong opposition, acknowledging that the process had made her more open to having the difficult dialogue with others and understanding their story. We appreciated the roles each of us played, making us more aware, open, and willing to engage in an exchange with differences. As I was able to value and respect my own journey, I could do the same for others.

4. Learning. The fourth stage in the process of embracing differences, Learning, is shaped by a sense of belonging, creating meaning from differences, and developing agency. Personalizing the work within the tribes and in class, working collaboratively in tribes, and feeling safe in sharing one's narrative and learning about differences through the other's narrative, allowed students to make meaning of the 'other.' The absence of fear allowed for learning to occur. Through a process of self-exploration, students delved deeper into understanding themselves, their assumptions, and their new learnings about others. Taneja shared, "I am curious now to learn…I have a desire and a hope…I want to go through this experience again to confirm a new side of my life and my emotions." Through the process of developing agency students began to create meaning on how they are influenced by the past and present. As Guajardo shared, "If we can know and understand how our place in space defines and shapes us…I then emerge in a space where I can love and care [about the other]."

Role of Dialogue

Mandeep Taneja - Dialogue Partner/Student Assistant

The role of dialogue starts with creating the desire to identify, observe, understand, and learn amongst the students. We began by looking at differences as a source of conflict and then moved on to celebrate these differences as the source of learning. Teaching reading skills and developing the desire to read are identified as unique

critical elements for a student's growth (Beers & Aliteracy, 1998). Similarly, the class themes and the process of critical inquiry were like *teaching to read*, however the role of dialogue was to develop the *desire to read*, the willingness to embrace the differences that exist.

The learning is not limited to another person or situational learning but extends to self-learning, through reflection and corresponding action in that minuscule society created in the classroom and within tribes. Through the engaged learning model, we were able to identify that the transition from *conformity* to *vulnerability* guided the early stages of the dialogue process.

Implications

This four-stage Embracing Differences Change Model is a process that can be introduced to enhance engaged learning through dialogue. Engaged learning is a transformational experience where students courageously step into their vulnerability, to connect to and deepen their understanding of themselves, in order to then approach the other. This process of discovery allowed students to make meaning of the process and their experience of the 'other.' Through dialogue that was intentional in deepening critical inquiry and heightening self-awareness, students engaged in experiences that allowed them to co-create with others.

The platform of emergency online teaching, while introducing challenges, did not disable or impede the transformational work experienced by students. As a result, the emergence of a model, facilitated by the change agents of trust, deep dive, and respect, offers promise and possibilities to the work of teaching and learning. The pedagogies of praxis and humanism create a learning context of possibility. To summarize, the engaged learning experience for embracing differences through dialogue is captured in eight action steps.

Eight Actions for Embracing Differences

Share

1.   It begins by connecting to your own personal story. Everyone has a personal narrative that matters. A narrative that makes meaning of who we are and what matters to us.

2.   There is value in sharing your story. Trust that in sharing your cultural narrative the first step is being taken towards your own openness to connecting to someone else.

Listen

3.   Listen to others with the intention of understanding. Listen to understand and learn. This does not mean that one must agree with what is being shared. That is not the purpose of listening. The goal is to 'see' the other.

4.   Listen to differences with the intention of learning. Setting one's intention can either open or close the learning pathway. This learning is aided by curiosity. Learn to be curious about the other.

Personalize

5.   Personalize the experience of embracing differences by heightening the relevance of the connection. To remain distant and aloof closes the pathway to connection and knowing.

6.   Find relevance in the experience. Strive to find connections at the physical, emotional, and spiritual level. This is aided by connecting head and heart.

Create

7.   Create meaning in the experience of embracing differences and allow for transformation to guide the process. Remember that true dialogue is transformational, therefore anticipate change.

8.   Create a sense of belonging by allowing connections of the heart. The differences we are seeking to embrace are those features that make us human. When we allow ourselves to see the other, we are in fact allowing our heart to be open and allowing our humanness to guide us.

Limitations

First, the limitations of qualitative research methodology are bounded by the subjectivity of the participants, both the dialogue partners and the facilitator. To address this limitation, all three co-researchers (dialogue partners and facilitator) engaged in exploratory discussions, seeking agreement in the naming of the pedagogical elements, as well as the dialogue questions. As research participants we sought member checks of the content, the questions, the process, and the model. The process of dialogic inquiry utilized in this study necessitated an interdependent relationship between the three researchers. To allow for validation of the emerging concepts, process, and model, the three co-researchers allowed for independent work and then sought checks and balances through collaborative exchanges.

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