Red City High School Meets *Blue* City High School Online♦:
Engaging Diversity in a Collaborative Inquiry with Students

Abstract
Forty students, twenty from suburban Spokane and twenty from suburban Philadelphia came together to reflect on how their views of themselves and each other shifted as a result of the relationships they developed during an online forum, an extracurricular activity for their high school advanced placement U.S. history class.

Overview

In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, the force of the *us* and *them* language in the public discourse accelerated at a rapid pace. The polarity of views and perspectives only exacerbated in the days leading up to the 2004 Presidential Election. Despite indications of shades of purple, the force of our public discourse continues to perpetuate an illusion of competing voices and polarized values.

In the fall of 2004, two high school history teachers, one from a suburb of Spokane Washington and the other from a suburb of Philadelphia Pennsylvania decided to build a bridge using the internet with their high school advanced placement U.S. History (APUSH) classes. With the help of technically savvy students at each end, the APUSH Forum was launched in early October, 2004. Participation on the forum was voluntary. Initially, students addressed issues of historic significance posed by their teachers. Before long, students generated threads of conversations ranging from controversial current events, (i.e., legalized abortion and gay marriage) to music preferences. This study explores the impact of their participation on their meaning making perspectives and the implications for transformative learning in an online environment.

Wasserman (2004) defined transformative learning from the relational perspective as the process by which groups of people engage in a critical reflection process that examines meaning they produce in their relationships (rather than as individuals) to identify their assumptions. In this form of reflection, the communication process, rather than the individual's thoughts becomes the unit of study. This is based on the belief that people co-produce meaning and thus change occurs in relationships.

Methodology

Twenty students from Spokane arrived in Philadelphia in the spring of 2006 to participate in an appreciative collaborative inquiry that explored what they learned about each other and themselves through their relationships. Specifically, students reflected on how their taken-for-granted ways of seeing themselves and each other were influenced by their encounter.

Our process of meaning making is grounded in *frames of reference* or *meaning perspectives* created by our experiences. These meaning perspectives, shaped by our assumptions, values and beliefs influence our behavior (Mezirow, 2003, 2000, 1990). We respond to the actions of others, through our own tacit belief systems. This process operates fairly smoothly until our taken-for-granted assumptions bump up against another whose values, assumptions or beliefs are

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♦ **Red States** and **Blue States** refer to those states whose electoral votes supported the Republican or Democratic Party presidential candidates respectively. The term began to emerge in mainstream political discussion following the 2000 presidential election. and term gained momentum after the 2004 presidential elections. The term since has been expanded to distinguish states perceived as liberal and those perceived as conservative.

in sharp contrast with our own. Transformative learning theory maintains that the disorienting dilemma presents an opportunity for examining our taken-for-granted perspectives, and changing, or expanding the way in which we make meaning (Mezirow and Associates 2000 p.7).

A review of the works of Mezirow Brookfield and Freire (Henderson 2002) identified four common phases learners traverse in transformative learning;

- Some sort of disruption in their view of the world
- Critical reflection on beliefs, values and assumptions that shape their current perspective
- The development of a new perspective to deal with discrepancies surfaced by the triggering event
- An integration of the new perspective into his or her life

In the course of our daily lives, the opportunity to pause and reflect on our meaning making processes is often an option not pursued.

The literature that describes the process of transformative learning has focused primarily on adults. Further, theories of human development suggest that most teens have not fully developed the capacity to reflect on their behavior from a third party perspective (Kegan, 1994). This experience that students were creating on the forum sparked the opportunity to explore how the students engaged across multiple differences (e.g., social class, culture and faith identities) and to offer the opportunity for pause and reflection.

This research builds on earlier studies that explored what conditions deepen understanding and sense making among people whose social worlds are significantly different (Wasserman, 2004). The study was viewed through the lens of social construction theory, which suggests that meaning is created in relationships (Gergen 1985; McNamee, Gergen 1999; Pearce, 1995), the communication literature that highlights how we create our social worlds in the turns of conversation and speech acts (Pearce, 2004), and literature on relational theory (Fletcher & Ragins, 1998; Gergen, unpublished; Wasserman, 2004) which proposes that people create new meaning in the process of relating.

The researchers used an appreciative collaborative inquiry (Wasserman 2004) to engage the students in a reflective process. First, students engaged in conversations in small groups at their respective school. They were asked to reflect back to defining moments in the online discussion. Defining moments were operationalized as interactions that prompted students to question or re-examine their values, ideas and feelings in a way that aroused confusion, disruption or challenge to their taken-for-granted way of viewing issues and/or their identity. Episodes identified as defining moments were excerpted and reviewed from archived online discussions. Next, a subset of students traveled from Spokane, Washington to Lower Merion, Pennsylvania for 4 days. The first day students traveled to historic sights, matched faces to names and played Frisbee together. They spent the second day at the host school in their inquiry. After establishing shared agreements for their conversations, students selected specific defining moments around which they organized their inquiry. The Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) model ((Pearce 2004) was used to guide both the inquiry and the data analysis process. The teachers were also interviewed.

Findings and Implications

The opportunity to meet face-to-face was reportedly consequential to identifying perspective shifts, and perhaps transformative learning that may not have been apparent prior to

the reflection. Five key findings identified included. Each is supported by numerous quotes and excerpts from the data in the more extended paper.

Five of the key findings identified included:

- Greater awareness of self in relationship to others who were different from them..

    I learned that I was afraid of difference more than I thought I was. I thought I was open

    minded but there were some differences that I was scared of.

    Getting to talk about what I firmly believe in opened my eyes to other perspectives and views

- The students identified that one group viewed issues through a "political lens" and the other group viewed issues through a religious faith-based lens

    We were arguing from different logic forms – how do you argue with someone when you are coming from different paradigms? Our faith is in logic and reason and their's is the bible.

- Enhanced capability to know and articulate one's perspective.

    When people are… supporting their argument in a way that is well researched, you need to as well. You can't just say what you think.

- Expanded view of one's own position to include that of another.

    Abortion is another one… Obviously I am still pro-choice but I can really understand how someone would be against abortion.

- Online relationships as a medium, creates the need to simplify how you see the other. Meeting face-to-face was consequential to recognizing that the other students' identities went beyond political and philosophical labels.

    Alex and I did not get along very well on the forum and meeting him I did not expect to get along with him – but meeting him we really got along, The main topic [we disagreed on] was gay marriage. With my religion I firmly believe that a man should marry a woman. I did not leave it open for debate. Alex came back and said this is what I believe… We said some harsh things on the Internet. We did not care for each other. We were being closed minded…. I was skeptical about meeting him I was not sure what he would remember. We did not say anything about it. {We} were able to be more open-minded and were able to see why people feel that they do…I was disappointed in myself that I made judgments too quick

    [If we were to continue], I think it would be totally different because we would be responding to people as individuals. [Before], the LM kids would respond to UH kids as one group. Now we would not be responding as LM v UH – we would be responding to

people individually – know each other as a whole person. Now that I know that people know who I am, I would not feel like I would have to represent all people or all Jews.

Now that you know them you want to understand them

▪ Students reported that they would be forever changed by this experience – not only in relating with each other, but also in relating to people in the future.

I think political awakening is a great way to put it. I think it was for everyone. I live in a house that is pretty conservative not single-minded not contrary to certain beliefs and I wasn't taught to think a certain way, not think a certain way. But after the forum I was taught to think my own way and to explore different ideas different possibilities. I'd go home and have conversations with my parents you know a conservative issue and then you know… and it was just really cool. It was interesting for them too. They learned a lot about different ways to look at things. I think overall it was just a great learning thing.

I'm still pretty conservative but I know why I think what I think now and I know how to defend it a lot more, and I know how to defend the different sides… I know why I think what I think and that sounds weird cause I didn't know that I didn't know.

I feel like when people talk about people who have faith more that I do, I hear it differently because I hear it how you guys will hear it. I have your perspective in the back of my head.

1. **Greater awareness of self in relationship to others who were different from them**. The relationships they formed online and deepened during their visit. Many students stated that while they had not changed their own position on an issue per se, they could now embrace an opposing view and understand it as another perspective.
2. **The students reflected on how they constructed their arguments at a systems or logic level.** They described one group as structuring their arguments issues through a "political lens" and the other group viewed issues through a religious faith-based lens.
3. **Enhanced capability to know and articulate one's perspective.** The act of articulating views with others, particularly others whose views differed significantly from their own, sharpened student's views of themselves.
4. **Online relationships as a medium potentially simplify how you see the other.** Students agreed that meeting face-to-face was consequential to recognizing that the complexity of each other's identities.
5. **Students felt forever changed by this experience, both in relating with each other, and in relating to people in the future.** Some described it as a political awakening. Others said that they feel like they carry the voices and perspectives of the new friends they made and bring those voices and perspectives into conversations with people at home and in their communities.

One of the participants in the inquiry worked on the data analysis as her senior project. As part of her project, she and another student created a video montage of their 5 days together. We hope to share this montage as part of our presentation.

Summary

Transformative learning theory teaches us that critical reflection is essential to the process. While the online experience expanded student's learning experience in their AP American History course, facilitated critical reflection with each other extended and deepened what students learned through their encounter with each other. The process promoted critical thinking, fostering self/other awareness in the areas of intellectual, social, class and faith diversity as well as supporting civic engagement. The findings from this study inform curriculum design particularly at a time when educators are increasingly pressured to *teach to the test*.

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