

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Scaffolding Eats Coddling for Lunch

[W]hy would we expect students who have come of age in neighborhoods and schools surrounded by people who largely look and think as they do to be highly skilled at handling personal insults hurled by those with different, yet similarly narrowly shaped, experiences and beliefs? Why should we expect that people who have experienced different outcomes of a society still struggling with racial and class issues will magically know how to get along? Why would we expect students to arrive a[t] college skilled at civil discourse when their only understanding of political debate consists of well-compensated people on opposing sides shouting to drown one another out? (J. C. & C. K. Cavanaugh, 2017)

John and Christine Cavanaugh (2017) worry that calls from many quarters for college students to grow up and get over insults imply a character defect among many college students and/or a poor job being done on campuses by institutions whose duties should include cultivating critical thinking and reflection. Whether the topic is supposed whiney students complaining about micro-aggressions or supposed over-protected adolescents requiring trigger warnings in syllabi or — in an opinion piece that may raise hackles for its implication that therapy dogs constitute coddling — coloring in coloring books and playing with puppies to help soothe the trauma of the Trump election (Ciccotta, 2016), there seems to have been a piling-on lately about this topic.

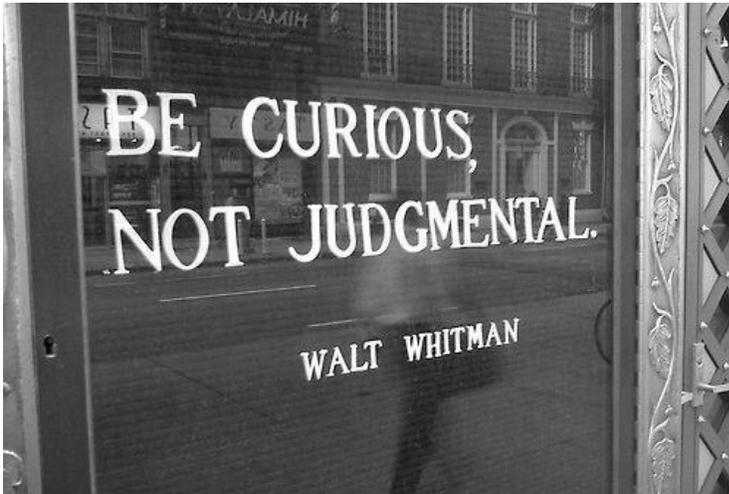
What is the Transformative Learning (TL) lens through which this can be viewed?

The quote from the Cavanaugh's at the start of this article lays out an argument for why colleges and universities face the challenge of walking the correct, fine line on this issue: many students are simply not prepared to engage with a broad diversity of opinion.

Yet such preparation is necessary for life as a citizen, as an employee, as a life-long learner. And college seems a logical place for the preparation to occur.

Most germane to this discussion, though, is that helping students develop appropriate coping and thriving strategies in polarized and incivil times offers a multitude of opportunities for faculty to lead students to transformative realizations and subsequent internalizations.

In other words, we may be living in a Dickensian best-of-times-worst-of-times postsecondary milieu: societal events are providing a best-of-times opportunity to prompt transformative learning amidst a worsening-of-times environment in which hurtful, hateful speech and action have seemed to gain traction for some reason. In such times, how do we help our students develop the skills and perspectives they need?



Helping students develop the ability to observe non-judgmentally, and from that basis, begin the process of considering others' beliefs, actions, and opinions, is at least a good first step. It is just as important that learners develop this capacity when considering their own beliefs.

You may recognize “non-judgmental observation” as a technique to help focus, to

become mindful, and/or to meditate. Ellen Langer (2016) has long maintained that teaching students to observe non-judgmentally while looking for differences and similarities is one of the best ways to help them develop mindfulness skills.

Is a controversial speaker coming to campus? That's an opportunity for students to dispassionately consider the speaker's viewpoint, compare and contrast such a stance with their own, and draw reasoned conclusions in an atmosphere absent the poisonous rhetoric that might otherwise infect the classroom.

But helping students learn to disenthrall themselves from taken-for-granted assumptions developed during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood can be challenging. This is where faculty can *scaffold* developmental practices that will help students *abandon* the need for any *coddling*.

Scaffolding means providing a structure that initially props up student learning but is eventually removed because the learning has instantiated to the degree that it and the learner stand on their own, with new knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes in place and securely anchored.

Langer (2016) provides specific advice to teach students how to observe dispassionately in order to search for differences and similarities. This is a form of scaffolding the ultimate ability to engage with personally unsavory ideas in order to form reasoned conclusions. Students with such ability would not need to be coddled from contrary opinions in a protective cocoon.

Scaffolding eats coddling for lunch.

See Langer's work (2014, 2016) for more ideas, but know this: the very act of searching for ways to compare and contrast two things privileges prefrontal cortex engagement over emotional center activity in the amygdalae and other limbic system brain regions. That in itself launches, then reinforces, dispassionate consideration.

The power and importance of dispassionate observation is addressed eloquently by Zajonc (2006):

One of the most powerful transformative interventions developed by humanity is contemplative practice or meditation. It has been specifically designed to move human cognition from a delusory view of reality to a true one: that is, to one in which the profound interconnectedness of reality is directly perceived. Global conflict has its deep source in the privileging of worldviews, in the reification of our particular understanding and the objectification of the other. Such ways of seeing our world are, at root, dysfunctional and divisive. Contemplative practice works on the human psyche to shape attention into a far superior instrument, one that can appreciate a wide range of worldviews and even sustain the paradoxes of life, ultimately drawing life's complexity into a gentle, non-judgmental awareness.

“Gentle, non-judgmental awareness” sure sounds nice in an age of often high-volume, low-reasoned debate in which the other's opinion is pilloried simply because it is “the other.”

References

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