Constructivist theory and border pedagogy foster diversity as a resource for learning

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Teaching in community college classrooms is characterized by increasing levels of diversity. Mobilizing diversity as a resource for learning can include specific instructional methods grounded in constructivist educational theory and border pedagogy. Their utility in pursuit of education fosters a form of cultural production enabling people to evaluate culture according to democratic principles and ideals.

Introduction

Diversity is part of the basic character of American life. As a constituent element of the workplace, diversity is mandated for virtually all public institutions and is implicit in the central values of American democracy: equality, freedom, liberty, and justice. Further, an inescapable outcome of diversity is the social borders and consequent categories it engenders (Giroux, 1992). Indeed, the borders that diversity influences and the categories they circumscribe, permeate the lives of people. Social borders present significant challenges for an educational system that brings together many different cultural perspectives for participation in a common dialogue.

College classroom teaching practices grounded in *constructivist educational theory* and *border pedagogy* (see Table 1) may not only meet the challenges presented by diversity in the classroom, but may actually contribute to diversity as a resource for learning in college classrooms.

Table 1. Major constructs and their definitions

Construct	Definition
Border pedagogy	The art and science of teaching that affirms the notion of difference as a central organizing principle of a common effort to enhance the quality of public life by linking the classroom to democratic society. Border pedagogy posits pedagogical processes, in part, as a form of border crossing where existing social boundaries can be challenged and redefined. Thus, it presumes the need to create conditions that enable students to become border crossers in order to develop an understanding of others in their own terms so that knowledge can be constructed in light of such understandings (Giroux, 1992).
Constructivist theory	Constructivist educational theory posits the ability to know and learn, and the motivation to know and learn, as inherent human qualities. The constructivist process is defined in terms of the individual's organizing, structuring and restructuring of experience—an ongoing lifelong process—in accordance with existing schemes of thought. In turn, these schemes become modified in the course of interaction with the physical and social world. Thus, past learning and knowledge help to build a base on which new learning occurs, a kind of strategic cognitive processing which in turn provides the reasoning and wisdom from which decisions are made and actions taken (Caine, Caine, and McClintic, 2002).
Diversity	Diversity refers to and describes the relationships among ethnicity, race, class, culture, gender and language of a particular population.

A sizable body of research has shown that from age two human beings perceive similarities and differences among persons based on physical characteristics, language, and clothing and have the ability to identify ethnic distinctions (Allport, 1952; Goodman, 1952; Lambert & Klineberg, 1967; Piaget & Weil, 1951; Ramsey, 1998). From a very early age individuals can sort others into categories and distinguish among people according to boundaries the individual constructs around each category. Since these tend to be rigid boundaries that both privilege and exclude in the categories they circumscribe, they affect, in a determining way, everyone's life by influencing the understanding of, and attitudes towards, race, class, gender, and ethnicity (Giroux, 1992). Particularly significant are the implications of the attitudinal and social consequences of diversity for education, especially given that diversity within school populations is dramatically on the rise across the country. Indeed, while the following discussion is primarily concerned with community college classrooms, diversity within school populations at all levels of education is increasing and projections indicate that the trend will continue (Garcia & Gonzalez, 1995; Young, 2002; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990).

A starting point for examination is the complexity resulting from diversity-defined social borders overlapping and interacting with one another in the classroom. The spontaneous nature of such complexity can, quite obviously, affect the overall educational process in most school environments but especially in public colleges where diversity is not the exception but the rule. An underlying current in some political circles today views classroom teachers at all levels of education as either too disinterested or too incompetent to read and interpret theoretical material relevant to their profession. Henri Giroux (1992) asserts that such critics ignore and undermine the skills and basic intelligence of most teachers. The classroom is, typically, the primary place outside the family where students learn about citizenship. The expectations of a democratic society with fundamental goals of equality, liberty, freedom, and justice is inescapably intertwined with an educational system capable of expanding its theories and adapting its practices to the diverse needs of students and families. Constructivist educational theory provides a theoretical framework emphasizing the interdependence of theory, pedagogy, students, and professors.

Educational theory in diverse classrooms: constructivism

Two primary tenets of constructivist educational theory hold particular significance for teaching in diverse college classrooms: the nature of knowledge as a co-construction and collaborative nature of classroom relationships. Paolo Freire (1970) describes the nature of knowledge as a co-construction that human beings develop in collaboration with other human beings and the environment.

Such a definition of the nature of knowledge has profound implications for diverse classrooms. Co-construction does not suggest that knowledge comes about through the efforts of human beings from a particular race, class, ethnicity, or any particular academic discipline. Nor does it imply that individuals construct knowledge in isolation. On the contrary, co-construction posits knowledge as coming about through the efforts of people interacting with each other and the world, something that directly influences the set of relationships present in the classroom. Clearly, the effective co-construction of knowledge in diverse classrooms requires crossing the different social locations, the different social borders, inevitably engendered by diversity.

Border crossing and knowledge as a co-construction call into question how students and professors interact on their journey to knowledge. For example, in traditional classrooms, which Freire (1970) refers to as the "banking system" of education, the student-professor journey to knowledge is straightforward in the sense that knowledge is understood to be the possession of

the expert, the professor. The journey consists of the teacher pouring, or depositing, knowledge into the presumably empty heads of students (Freire, 1970). In the banking system the nature of knowledge is transmissive, consisting of giving and receiving.

In contrast to the banking system, the constructivist understanding of knowledge has a much different impact on the student-professor relationship. If knowledge is understood to be a co-construction process, then neither the student nor the professor can come to knowledge independent of the other. Specifically, the student-professor relationship is marked by both parties simultaneously being students and professors (Freire, 1970).

Within such a perspective, students and professors are mutually dependent in the journey since knowledge is not possible when it is the function of only one voice (Freire, 1970). For knowledge to be true knowledge, according to the constructivist view, there must be collaboration among many voices. That requires sharing both the power to construct knowledge and the responsibility for such construction. Consequently, constructivist theory posits fundamentally democratic principles of power sharing.

Pedagogy in diverse classrooms: border pedagogy

Diversity presents certain pedagogical challenges. For example, in order to be consistent with constructivist theory and democratic principles, all classroom members must have the opportunity to participate in collaborative relationships and the construction of knowledge. However, in diverse classrooms, where many different cultural perspectives meet, particular voices are often privileged at the expense of others (Giroux, 1992).

In many traditional classrooms, such as those described by the banking system, pedagogical processes function according to mainstream assumptions about culture as defined by Western ethnocentric ideas (Giroux, 1992). Consequently, the "mainstream assumptions" empower some voices more than others. For example, during classroom discussions, Asian American students often remain silent out of their cultural considerations not to interrupt other class members while European American students, out of their cultural values that favor getting one's opinion heard, dominate the discussion.

Since classrooms bring together many different cultural norms for participation, consistency with constructivist theory requires the pedagogical approach to account for contested and unequal power relations that develop when multiple social borders meet in a common dialogue. An important way to account for power relations is by placing a premium on the attribute that distinguishes a diverse classroom, namely, difference. Processes that place a premium on difference level the playing-field in diverse classrooms so that all stu-

dents, regardless of individual cultural mandates, have equal access to classroom activities. Focusing on difference identifies students' encounters with the social borders as the point where they experience diversity. By valuing differences, the encounters create borderlands where a level arena for effective democratic collaboration and co-construction of knowledge can occur (Giroux,1992).

Henri Giroux's (1992) conceptualization of border pedagogy promotes the "notion of difference" as a central, organizing force in classroom journeys to knowledge. While he suggests developing a set of standards to facilitate classroom journeys to knowledge (democratic guidelines) and a goal for education (enhancing the quality of public life), the primary pedagogical issue for Giroux is difference. His approach identifies difference as the starting point and by so doing makes classroom activities accessible to multiple cultural perspectives, an alignment of border pedagogy with constructivist theory and democratic principle.

A second aspect of Giroux's (1992) thinking is congruent with constructivist theory which posits pedagogy as a form of "cultural production." The perspective acknowledges that how professors teach fundamentally influences the meaning constructed from such teaching. More specifically, it is a system of practices by which students and professors construct meaning concerning themselves and the ways in which they interact with others and the environment (Giroux, 1992). Since these processes are cultural constructs themselves, Giroux's border pedagogy is located within culture, not above it as is the case in transmissive pedagogy, a fact that opens up important possibilities for teaching in diverse classrooms.

For example, by locating pedagogy within culture, educators interrogate culture itself. Learners challenge, question, and evaluate the validity of constructs according to democratic ideals (Giroux, 1992). Such inquiry is vitally important since cultural constructs—knowledge, desires, values, and indeed the social borders engendered by diversity—are not necessarily consistent with democratic principles needed to enhance the quality of public life. The ability to employ democratic ideals such as liberty, equality, and justice becomes important for developing relationships among people (Giroux, 1992). Border pedagogy stimulates the interrogation of both the social borders inherited by individuals and those that individuals construct themselves. It makes visible, and therefore open to questioning, both the strengths and weaknesses of constructs that fundamentally shape our history, our discourse, and our social relations. It signals an epistemological shift from pedagogy as transmissive to pedagogy as interrogative, and the shift links the classroom to a larger dialogue aimed at developing a more democratic society (Giroux, 1992).

Instructional methods for diverse college classrooms

Clearly, no one instructional method is best for all purposes. Most professors know that they cannot hope to be effective in the classroom using one method all the time. Methods need to be driven by clear learning objectives adapted for variables such as content to be covered, goals to be achieved and learning styles of individual students. However, a core method of discussion, in conjunction with other methods, works well with groups of diverse students. Discussion is a well established educational method with adult students (Brophy, 1989) and, when grounded in constructivist theory and border pedagogy, can tap the richness of diversity as a resource for the construction of knowledge.

Moreover, discussion activates the many social borders that come together in diverse classrooms. When students express their experiential knowledge through personal narrative they are speaking from their own, culturally produced perspective and effectively animating the social borders that circumscribe their perspective.

Yet, the significant value of discussion as an instructional method in diverse college classrooms does not mean that discussion should be a daily occurrence. Clearly, lecture can be used to present information which will inform discussions. Small group work on issues generated from discussions and periodic workshops or debates around specific topics or tasks can extend learning in the classroom.

Setting the stage for discussion in diverse classrooms

While many traditional classrooms acknowledge the importance of dialogue for learning, actual group discussion is rare. Research shows that classroom dialogue characterized by educators as "discussion" is more likely to be recitations where the instructor functions as the authority possessing knowledge and asks questions while students answer by reciting knowledge they have already gained or are currently learning (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Rarely are such dialogues real discussions where both professors and students collaborate to problem-solve, construct new knowledge, incorporate knowledge into personal experience in order to construct new meaning, or to clarify concepts. In order to set the stage for actual discussion at least two elements of the college classroom must be addressed: student voice and classroom environment.

Student voice

The individual student's voice within the context of border pedagogy, manifests in the classroom as experience and scholarship (Hooks, 1994). Voice surfaces in the classroom by relating one's personal experience to scholarship and exploring one's understanding of the

relationship through group discussion. While some theorists, such as Diana Fuss (1989), remain skeptical concerning the role of personal experience in classroom discussion, still other educators, such as Freire (1970), Hooks (1994), and Giroux (1992), promote personal experience as a rich and vital pedagogical tool.

Hooks (1994) asserts that students' personal experiences afford them a legitimate knowledge base on which they can build. Her point here is important. Students do not leave their lives at the door and enter the classroom as empty, disembodied heads waiting to be filled with knowledge by the professor. When college students enter the classroom they bring with them experiences and understandings gained from years of previous schooling and living in the world. Thus, Hooks' point has significant implications for student voice in a diverse classroom grounded in border pedagogy.

As Hooks (1994) implies, acknowledging the value of experiential knowledge empowers students with a legitimate source on which to build. Voicing their experience and prior knowledge can help students construct new knowledge. For example, experiential knowledge helps students to formulate and analyze theory: "I know child development theory to be true because all four of my children manifested the same age-linked developmental sequences." It affords them ownership, through the connections between scholarship and personal experiences, of new knowledge and skills constructed in the classroom and provides an opportunity for them to check the validity of, or to interrogate, their existing knowledge base. The results can inform their subsequent construction of new knowledge (Hooks, 1994).

Furthermore, employing one's voice implies a primacy in generating discourse which can lead to forming one's own knowledge and developing one's decision-making abilities (Hooks, 1989). When students move from silence into speech in public discourse, they function as agents in the construction of their own knowledge and identity. The quality of a student's voice can act as an evaluative tool for assessing how students may be empowered or made voiceless in the classroom. The Asian American students mentioned earlier who remained silent during class discussions while some European American students dominated the discussion were not silenced by ignorance of the subject matter, nor by those European American students, but by conflicting cultural norms. Their silence—the quality of their voice—can signal to the professor a need to adjust teaching practices to account for such conflicting cultural norms.

The implication for the classroom is that professors need to approach learning not simply as the construction of knowledge, but as a place where cultural practices are questioned and developed (Hooks, 1994). Outside the home, school is

where students learn how to be citizens, and citizenship requires more than knowledge. It requires the acquisition of a broad spectrum of values and ideals endemic to one's culture. To come to voice, therefore, refers to the broader issue of how people develop into agents in the process of making history or become victims of history. Professors must address how students may be empowered to participate in the cultural processes of agency and self-formation (Hooks, 1994).

Classroom environment

Classroom environment is another element that needs to be addressed when setting the stage for discussion. How is space for discussion created in a diverse college classroom? What are the characteristics of an environment that can empower the use of personal narrative and discussion for building knowledge and understanding? After all, students may risk ridicule and embarrassment when sharing their personal narratives with a group of relative strangers. Furthermore, most professors have at least witnessed, if not participated in, scenes of mayhem masquerading as classroom discussion. Yet the reality is that classroom environment is intentionally created through decisions made by classroom participants. Therefore, the dynamics that contribute to an environment conducive to the use of personal narrative and discussion as pedagogical tools can also be identified and created.

Shared responsibility for creating the environment is foundational to classroom dynamics grounded in constructivist theory and border pedagogy (Hooks, 1994). All participants, not just the professor, are responsible for shaping the dynamics. While professors will always have more responsibility because they are held accountable by the larger institutional structure, it is, nevertheless, the implementation of shared responsibility that can create classroom dynamics appropriate to border pedagogy.

The capacity to actively take on responsibility for classroom dynamics is profoundly affected by interest in one another, genuine interest in hearing other voices, and appreciating the presence of others (Hooks, 1994). Developing a classroom ethic of interest in one another begins with the professor who must continually recognize and value the contributions of all students.

In a classroom anchored in constructivist theory and border pedagogy, valuing individual worth characterized by difference, recognizing and valuing the varied perspectives that come together in the classroom, helps create an environment where individual experience can meet scholarship and be expressed in personal narrative for the co-construction of knowledge.

Teaching in diverse college classrooms: the nuances of leading a collaborative discussion

Once a classroom environment characterized by shared responsibility, valued difference, and purposeful discussion is established, the professor must then manage it all. Certainly, professors must present information, provide a relevant context for discussion, and make connections to scholarship. However, the more nuanced aspects of leading a collaborative discussion, where diversity itself informs discussion, requires the professor to go beyond standard teaching practices.

One such technique requires the professor to find respectful ways to keep students focused (Hooks, 1994). For example, focusing questions, such as, "that's an important point, how do you see it relating to the subject matter?" or "what in the subject matter reminds you of that experience?" redirect the student's narrative to the subject matter while also respecting the student's experience as a valuable resource.

Further, such focusing questions do not stunt a student's initiative. Indeed, it is another important element of teaching in a diverse classroom grounded in border pedagogy to consistently affirm student initiative and, whenever possible, promote introspection—to encourage students to look deeper into their own experiences, how they perceive their experiences, the accuracy of their perceptions, and connections to the academic material. Techniques for leading a collaborative discussion—respectfully keeping students focused, encouraging student initiative and promoting introspection—underscore the fact that the professor must facilitate discussion so students feel secure in voicing their narratives while also knowing that ideas and concepts suggested by their narratives will be probed and explored by the group (Hooks, 1994).

There is nothing pedagogically wrong with challenging a student's experience. Unfortunately, the authority of experience is more often used to silence people in the classroom than to empower them. The power lies in the passion of experience (Hooks, 1994). There is a passion that is evoked when students encounter academic material that reminds them of episodes in their lives. Suddenly the episode has a new language, it is validated as legitimate, their experience has a stronger meaning because it is recognized and affirmed by a wider circle of people—truly empowering, especially if the student values the people in the wider circle.

Leading a collaborative discussion grounded in border pedagogy requires the professor to demonstrate inclusive listening skills. Many students have difficulty taking seriously what other students, and even themselves, have to say in the classroom. Since many students have been schooled through the banking system, they have learned that value lies only in what the professor has to say, that the

professor is the only person in the room with a valid source of knowledge. Even if the student says something of value that is acknowledged by the professor, it is often the professor's validation that students listen to, not the voice of their peer (Hooks, 1994). If diversity is to be a resource for learning, students must learn to listen to others. It is part of the professor's responsibility to demonstrate the value of inclusive listening skills for participation in classroom discussion.

Clearly, the professor's voice in the classroom is a key element in facilitating discussion. However, border pedagogy requires dialogue to start with the uniqueness of each class member; the impetus for discussion comes from the particularity of each classroom participant. Again, the professor influences the discussion in several important ways by providing resources and parameters for discussion. Nevertheless, the professor must go beyond standard techniques if diversity is to be used as a resource for learning. The professor must stimulate—then follow the initiative of—students in their narratives (Hooks, 1994).

The professor cannot enter the classroom with a rigid agenda governing teaching practices (Hooks, 1994). Since an important value of discussion and experience as resources for learning lies in students making connections between what is being said by the group, scholarship, and their own personal experiences, the professor's agenda needs to be flexible in order to allow for productive digressions and spontaneous shifts in direction. Since experience enters the classroom as personal narrative, the discussion needs to follow productive non sequiturs as different memories are evoked by classroom interactions. Pedagogical processes must adapt to the needs of the people in the room, not the other way around, and a rigid agenda governing teaching practices simply does not meet the need.

Conflict and ambiguity are key elements in discussion informed by diverse experiential knowledge and, as such, indicate another important aspect of leading a collaborative discussion. In diverse classrooms ambiguity abounds as there are many different cultures present, many different ways of learning and knowing, and, consequently, many different possible right answers. Such ambiguity does not mean that anything goes, nor does it mean that an educational enterprise which values difference sinks into individualistic relativism in which there is no consequence to anything, everything is relative, therefore, nothing really means anything. Diversity and a framework that promotes difference as the starting point for pedagogical processes require acknowledging the legitimacy of multiple ways of learning and knowing.

Conflict also needs to be embraced when facilitating discussion in a classroom. Passionate conflict often occurs when multiple perspectives meet in a common discussion (Hooks, 1994). In fact, conflict is

very often inevitable. The question for professors regarding conflict is not *if* there will be any, but what to do with it *when* it arises. Should conflict be suppressed or ignored? Should it be embraced as part of the learning process? The latter is the case with border pedagogy. In a classroom that intentionally focuses on difference and is structured so that different—often opposing—perspectives engage one another, conflict is very often an unavoidable occurrence. Border pedagogy harnesses not only the conflicting views engaged in discussion, but also the passion that very often accompanies conflicting views and, therefore, provides yet another resource for learning.

Moving from theory to practice

Clearly, the manner in which professors facilitate discussion in the classroom is a point where teaching practices can mobilize diversity as a resource for learning. For example, in their efforts to help students explore personal experience within the context of scholarship for the construction of knowledge, professors can respectfully keep students focused by posing skillful questions that redirect student narrative to the subject matter. Here the goal is for students to explore their personal experience—experiences that they perceive and understand from the vantage-point of their own particular social location—in order to learn subject matter without losing sight of relevant scholarship.

Another important strategy to mobilize diversity as a resource for learning lies in the types of activities and assignments professors develop. Brophy and Alleman (1991) suggest general guidelines for developing classroom activities and assignments. First, an activity or assignment must start out with the major goals to be achieved. Ideally, the goals concern students' understanding of the content and the ability to transfer and apply such content to contexts outside the classroom. Second, the activity needs to be valid in its assumptions of students' prior knowledge, time, space, and materials that it will require. Third, consider cost-effectiveness. Do the expected benefits justify the costs in terms of time and effort?

Professors can adjust activities in ways that promote the diversity present in a particular classroom. For example, recognition of individual worth, as noted earlier, is a key element for creating a classroom environment where students express their personal experiences for the co-construction of knowledge (Hooks, 1994). Underlying such recognition of individual worth is the ability to empathize with the personal experiences of peers, thus developing students' ability to recognize the fundamental value of each person's presence in the room.

Promoting student initiative is important for mobilizing diversity as a resource for learning. For example, including students in the decision-making processes of the

class provides them with the opportunity to take initiative and be responsible for key elements of the class. Further, when students take part in the decision-making processes the curriculum is invigorated and becomes more relevant to both students and professors (Banks, Banks, & Clegg, 1998). Students may participate in decisions such as specific topics to cover, reading assignments, exam questions, and paper topics which can subsequently encourage them to take initiative in class discussions and responsibility for classroom dynamics.

An important, and immediately visible, way to move from theory into practice concerns room arrangement. The physical environment of the classroom should be consistent with constructivist theory. For example, classrooms where student desks are arranged in rows facing the front of the room, or lecture halls where student seats are literally bolted to the floor facing the front of the room are inconsistent with constructivist theory since such an arrangement implies knowledge is located only at the front of the room where the professor stands—inhibiting co-construction of knowledge. On the other hand, movable tables and chairs allow students and professors to face each other as they interact while also implying that each class member has something valuable to contribute to the class.

Discussion

That diversity is a major characteristic of our educational system is an undeniable fact. Diversity packs our schools with a rich variety of experience, knowledge, viewpoint, and style that animates them and gives meaning to our national philosophy of *e pluribus unum*.

Constructivist theory and border pedagogy provide the necessary and proven theoretical frameworks to mobilize diversity as a resource for learning in diverse classrooms. For example, constructivist tenets of co-construction and collaborative relationships highlight the need to cross the rigid social boundaries found in diverse classrooms as such border crossing positions students within a productive exchange of narratives. Border pedagogy's focus on the notion of difference as the starting point for pedagogical processes levels the playing field by accounting for contested and unequal power relations. Further, the epistemological shift to pedagogy as interrogative enables students and professors to interrogate not simply attitudes, concepts, and scholarship, but also the underlying social constructs that lead to the formation of attitudes, concepts, and scholarship.

However, implementing diversity as a resource for learning requires teaching practices to go beyond standard techniques to more nuanced approaches to teaching designed specifically for diverse classrooms. Professors need to facilitate discussion through student

narratives and then follow them in their narratives. Professors also need to enter a diverse classroom with a flexible agenda governing teaching practices and to respectfully keep students focused by redirecting their narratives to the subject matter without undermining the importance of the narrative as resource for learning the subject matter. They also need to promote inclusive listening skills.

In addition to a solid foundation of proven educational theory/pedagogy and appropriate teaching practices, several other elements of the educational enterprise need to be addressed in order to maximize diversity as a resource for learning. Instructional methods, classroom environment, and student voice need to be adjusted for diverse classrooms so that the strengths of constructivist theory and border pedagogy can flourish. While all these elements of educational enterprise are necessary for facilitating diversity as a classroom resource for learning, there should be an ethic of action that overlays the entire effort: an ethic of doing, of acting on, of pushing forward.

Inclusive listening skills cannot simply be talked about. The professor must actually listen to students and find ways to make it clear to the group that every individual student voice is heard. The professor cannot merely talk about the importance of taking a genuine interest in, or recognizing the fundamental worth of, each person in the room. The professor must actively take a genuine interest in, and explicitly recognize the basic worth of, every person present in the classroom.

All may be easier said than done given the probability that the professor does not like or clashes with in some way at least one person in the room. Nevertheless, the professor must act in a concrete, systematic, and consistent way to cultivate professional educational practices as an intentional part of the structure of the class.

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