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On Claiming an Education as Transformative Learning

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Abstract

In this essay, the authors explore the concept of “claiming an education” and its relationship to transformative learning. Using a dialogue format, the authors situate their perspectives within an articulation of the particular ways that they have been formed as university instructors; forward their views on the vitality of intentionally designed co-learning environments; offer concrete suggestions for the development of co-learning environments within which the claiming of education may occur; and share students’ reflections on the meaning and implications of their transformative experiences for themselves and for their continuing engagement in the world.

Keywords: agency, change, co-learning, engagement, transformative learning

On Claiming an Education as Transformative Learning

In 1977, poet and scholar Adrienne Rich delivered a remarkable convocation speech at Douglass College (a women’s residential college at Rutgers University). In *Claiming an Education*, as the speech has come to be known, Rich challenges the students in her audience to transform their notions of why they are in college and how they might choose to participate as learners from that of being passive recipients of education to exercising choice and agency as ones laying claim to that which they rightfully own.

A clear expression of Rich’s feminist politics and of the time in which it was written, *Claiming an Education* continues to have resonance for students raised and educated in an era of high-stakes testing and of the teaching that prepares students for those tests. In this article, we share strategies that we have developed to assist students to “claim an education” as a starting point for the development of intellectual, ethical, and civic agency. In our view, this development requires engagement with transformative processes such that students (which includes the faculty who learn *with* students, even and especially as they teach) may exit their formal learning environments equipped to face the challenges of our world.

The first part of this essay introduces each of the authors and offers a context for our individual and collective interest in helping students claim their education as a cornerstone of transformative learning. We have structured the article as a dialogue, showing us engaging with each other in the sort of generative co-learning that we seek to catalyze in our courses. (As faculty support specialists at our university as well as instructors, we operate from a distinctly relational model, and we have organized this article, and especially the dialogue section, to

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mimic this approach.) We end with brief reflections from two students on their experiences as co-learners, and we offer some concluding thoughts for the reader.

A Conversation among Colleagues

Celine Fitzmaurice (CF): I worked for many years in experiential education settings before becoming a university instructor. These professional experiences included instructing wilderness-based Outward Bound courses, leading social justice education programs for US citizens in Mexico and Central America, and supporting college students in my roles as an international student advisor and a coordinator for a student-led service-learning program. In all of these positions, I found myself serving as a facilitator of transformative educational experiences. I was fortunate to be introduced to a Freirean approach to education in my first position after college. What stuck with me from that approach was that individuals learn best when they are invited to reflect on their own lived experiences in the context of an issue being explored. This, combined with deep listening to the authentic stories of others, proved to be key ingredients in motivating students to become agents of their own lives and compassionate advocates for others.

Well into my career, I embraced the possibility that my true vocation was that of an educator, but my own educational approach looked nothing like the traditional teaching approaches that I had been exposed to as a student. I had long dismissed the possibility of teaching in a classroom setting because I was under the false impression that transformative education could not take place in this formal venue. This changed when I was invited to teach a course for Portland State University's Capstone program, a required service-learning course for seniors that combines academic learning with community-based experiences. Over the past 15 years, I have had the pleasure of teaching Capstones on a variety of social and environmental topics. In this role, I've enjoyed integrating the experiential and transformative techniques I employed in previous jobs to a classroom and community setting. Out of this work arose a growing interest in actively supporting students to claim their education.

Vicki Reitenauer (VR): I started my university teaching career in 2000, after having worked for more than a decade in community-based organizations. Through roles as an advocate and educator in the fields of domestic violence prevention, women's reproductive health, and community health, I developed a keen interest in investigating how "change" happens on an individual and community level, and the relationship among learning, personal growth, and change. Whether talking with a person considering leaving an abusive relationship (or seeking to change their own abusive behavior within a relationship), or choosing from among a variety of options for pregnancy prevention, I came to understand that the exercising of personal agency—the capacity for making choices and exerting the power to assert those choices—is a necessary condition for this choice-making to happen in a way that contributes to health and well-being.

I was startled, then, to begin my university teaching career (in women's, gender, and sexuality studies) and have students regularly defer their judgment (as makers of work and producers of knowledge) to mine. Students regularly asked me—as they have so many of us, so much of the time—to tell them *exactly* what I was looking for so that they could simply provide it, pick up their grade, and move on. What a waste, I thought and still think, of their unique talents, the particular perspectives and approaches only they can bring to bear on the world. Starting with the second course I taught, I have used Rich's essay to ground an orienting reflective essay required of every student, and all of my pedagogical strategies are designed to

exercise our capacities for claiming an education—including mine, as an active learner in the communities in which I am also the “official” teacher.

Celine, why is it important—necessary, even—to talk about claiming an education? Why now?

CF: Our student body at PSU reflects a significant cross-section of US society. Traditional-age college students mingle with older adults returning to school to increase their skillset or reorient their careers. We also serve returning veterans, undocumented students, and newly arrived immigrants and refugees, among many others. Students’ life experiences, culture and languages, dreams, and perspectives represent a huge spectrum of diversity. Yet, they are united by their common identity as “Americans.” If they are to succeed together in this messy democracy, they must be able to communicate with and learn from each other across their differences. No lecture can replace the potential for common understanding that a co-learning approach provides.

Secondly, the current student debt crisis places a huge burden on students and they are, understandably, desperate for an education that will prepare them for jobs with adequate compensation to pay off their debt. As a result, students are highly invested in their education and getting exactly what they need to secure a stable life. In my mind, a “banking” method of education, in which a prescribed and limited set of knowledge is conferred to students, no longer serves their needs. They are better served by an educational approach that meets them where they are and equips them to develop the knowledge and skills they desire to live and work in complex, dynamic, and diverse settings.

VR: I also believe that, while many of our students face financial barriers that are enormous, they—and we all—hunger “for work that is real,” as Marge Piercy puts it in her powerful poem “To be of use,” when she writes “[t]he pitcher cries for water to carry / and a person for work that is real” (Piercy, 1982, p. 106). In other words, I suspect we know on some level that it’s possible to work in ways that use our talents, gifts, and perspectives to “be the change” we want to see in the world. To my mind, claiming an education is a step towards more broadly claiming our rights and our responsibilities in co-creating that world.

I think we must also mention our current political moment. As we have this conversation in early January 2017, it seems to me that the consequences of our educational policies and practices over the past several decades could not be starker. When we can no longer discern the true from the patently false, when we increasingly experience the corporatizing of our educational institutions and the cooptation of the public good for private gain, when we recognize the profound limits around rigorous and consequential critical thinking, I’d argue that those of us interested in working for a just, equitable, and inclusive world for all *must* ground a claiming an education philosophy and practice at the heart of our teaching. And that requires a shift in the role of both facilitator and students.

CF: In my mind, the role of the facilitator in supporting students to “claim their education” is two-fold. The facilitator takes on some of the roles of a traditional instructor but also embraces the role of a “co-learner” with her students. An educational mentor once told me that learners—all learners—crave structure. In other words, individuals learn best when there is some scaffolding in place to contain the learning process. Her advice for creating and supporting this structure has served me well over the years. Among other things, she counseled me to set a clear time and place for learning to take place, to draft educational goals for a course and an agenda for each learning encounter that students can build upon or revise, and to facilitate the development of community norms so that students can interact with each other in a safe and

productive manner. In my mind, the role of the instructor also includes bringing in relevant texts, articles, or content to bear on the course themes, while leaving plenty of space for students to share their own knowledge and life experiences. This is where the role of co-learner enters in. If one is to support students in claiming their education, she must be prepared to relinquish intellectual control of the course and embrace learning side-by-side with her students through the exchange of knowledge and diverse perspectives.

VR: In your mentioning a mentor of yours, Celine, and of the importance of understanding the transformative educational space as one of co-learning, I'm reminded of a quote a graduate teaching assistant in one of my courses once shared with me. One of her mentors had told her that "every learning process is a grieving process"—meaning that, when we are truly learning and growing, we are having to let go of something, too. And that there is a grief in that letting go, a grief that requires some tenderness, some processing. The educator who chooses to take this on, then, must create and hold a space for feeling and doing, along with thinking. This seems to me to get to the heart of the prospect of transformation: experiencing the full range of human emotions that arise in the presence of learning and growth, thinking about the implications of that learning and growth in the full context of our lives, and using all of that to make choices about how to be and act in the world.

Celine, what does this look like for you in practice? What are some specific strategies you use to support students in claiming their education?

CF: There are so many strategies for claiming an education that it would be difficult to list them all here, but I'll share a few that I have employed with some success over the years. It's important for me to say that I've learned many of these from my colleagues and have adapted them to my own teaching.

Setting the Physical Space

A simple tool for signaling to students that you are serious about claiming an education is to set up the classroom space in a manner that discourages intellectual hierarchy. In my case, we always sit in a circle so that everyone can see each other's face. As the instructor, I occupy one chair in the circle as opposed to a desk at the front of the room.

Building Community

I firmly believe that in order to support students to claim their education, we first need to invite students to bring their full identities and life experiences into the learning community. This process helps students begin to understand where their peers are coming from and lays the foundation for a co-learning community in which students know, respect, and learn from each other. There are many ways to invite students to share some aspect of their identities or life stories in a classroom environment. These include things like simple name activities and icebreakers that gradually invite students to share more of themselves.¹ You may worry about the time it takes to facilitate these icebreakers, but I believe that laying this groundwork at the beginning of the term leads to a stronger learning experience for all in the long run. I can't tell you the number of times that a student admitted to me that they were resistant to the community-building activities we did at the beginning of the term, but were so grateful for them by the end

¹ There are many resources for these kinds of activities. Feel free to contact the authors for more information.

of the course.

Orienting Students to the Concept of *Claiming an Education*

In the first two weeks of class, I often assign Rich's speech and then follow this up with a classroom discussion of what it means to "claim an education." I typically project a quote or two from the speech and then provide discussion prompts to help them reflect on her words, like in the example below:

The first thing I want to say to you who are students, is that you cannot afford to think of being here to receive an education; you will do much better to think of yourselves as being here to claim one. (Rich, 1977, p. 1)

- In your mind, what does it mean for you to "claim" your education?
- How might you behave differently in this learning environment, if you were to "claim" as oppose to "receive" your education?

Teaching Practices to Encourage Students to Claim Their Education

Over the course of the term, I do my best to create opportunities for students to claim and direct their own education. For example, students often lead reading discussions for their peers. This involves a small team of students selecting readings, assigning them to their peers, developing robust discussion questions, and then co-facilitating the actual reading discussion. I also integrate the practice of "student teach-ins," in which a team of students plans and facilitates an interactive lesson. Peer review and evaluation is another common practice for encouraging students to respond to and strengthen each other's work. In most courses, I invite students to fill out a peer- and self-evaluation of a team project, which contributes to the final grade for the course. Finally, any cooperative learning strategies that encourage students to interact and learn from each other contributes to students claiming their education. Some of the strategies I frequently employ include group mapping of ideas, think/pair/share activities, jigsaw discussions, and mock public hearings.

VR: I also design and embed opportunities for students to offer direct leadership in our classroom for both the process and the content of our class sessions. In each of my classes, students are required to co-develop course content and facilitate course processes. In a literature course I'm teaching this term, for example, students discuss the memoirs we're reading not only in large-group discussion, but also in smaller book groups. Each student in the class facilitates two book group discussions and assigns supplementary material for their book group members to consult before the discussion. In another of my courses, "Writing as Activism," students co-design and co-lead weekly writing workshops. In my experience, student engagement grows dramatically when they understand that the machinery of the course absolutely requires that engagement.

Perhaps the most important element for me around students' claiming of their education is the employment of elements of self-grading within a course. I have moved to a fully self-graded model in all of my courses, but there are less wholesale ways to employ aspects of self-grading, too. From self-graded assignments within a course, to student development of rubrics to guide the instructor's evaluation, to faculty and student conferencing to co-determine a grade, there are numerous approaches an instructor might take to empower students to practice

individual goal-setting relative to their learning and then self-evaluate their efforts². This practice reflects the term that bell hooks uses as the subtitle for her book *Teaching to Transgress*, which she got from Paulo Freire: “education as the practice of freedom” (Hooks, 1994; Freire, 1976).

In my experience, this freedom that Freire and hooks speak of is not just one that students get to experience; it’s one that I actively experience, too. It’s been one of the greatest rewards for me as an instructor to create the container--the structure--for the co-learning experience, and then to trust the worthiness of that structure to hold us all as we actively work together from our various positions within the classroom (and across the differences in social location we represent) to learn with and from each other.

CF: To teach in this manner requires a leap of faith. I was raised (as the daughter of a college professor) to believe that good teaching lay in preparing solid lectures and delivering these to your students. In other words, I was steeped in an “expert” model of education. I have long recognized that this approach to teaching is not authentic to me. Thus, I’ve leaned into my role as a facilitator of transformative education while doing my best to balance this role with the responsibilities I’ve accepted as “instructor of record” for a particular course.

On the rewards side, I am fed by the consistently positive comments I receive from students at the end of the term both in course evaluations and in unsolicited comments. As a result of positioning myself as a co-learner in the classroom and sharing my own questions and vulnerabilities, I am privileged to know my students on a deeper level. This often results in long-term connections with former students beyond the life of the course. Students have come back to me as teaching assistants, guest speakers, and community partners. I have also been honored to serve on their thesis committees, work side by side with them as community activists, and attend major events in their lives.

Perhaps most importantly, the rewards lie in hearing students express how they have been liberated by the experience of claiming their own education in a college course. The following is an excerpt from former student M. Krieger, that speaks to the hold this form of education exerts on students:

I think that the most transformative aspect of this course was getting a chance to make real, lasting connections to my fellow classmates while we mutually navigated through our diverse set of course activities. I feel proud of my group of peers (including Celine) and will remember our time together as us creating meaningful experiences together. Whether it was an emotion-sharing activity, a grocery store experiment, a small group project, or a group discussion, we conspired together to make our course our own. This has been unique for me in the realm of my entire undergraduate education. Being at the close of our course now, I feel a true sense of pain from the loss of our temporary class family. (Reitenauer, 2016)

In this passage, Max speaks to the rewards of “conspiring together” with his peers and instructor to truly claim an educational experience. As students come to know and respect each other in this learning environment, they open themselves to the kind of honest intellectual and emotional exchange that I believe leads to transformation. While we don’t know the end of the chapter for Max, we do know that this experience struck him as unique, powerful, and even emotional. My hope is that by supporting students to claim their own education, we will instill in

² An extended discussion of self-grading philosophy and strategies is beyond the scope of this article. Please see the References page for a forthcoming article that addresses this more fully. The authors will also happily share additional strategies for self-grading; contact them directly for more information.

them a desire to further develop and carry a sense of agency forward in the many theaters of their lives—as individuals, as workers, as members of their local communities, and as national and global citizens.

VR: Max’s words illustrate that internal experience of transformation born of claiming—including the grief in the loss of the community in which that transformation happened. I’m reminded of the words of another student, Kimberly Lane, who speaks to the power of understanding new possibilities for becoming an agent of change through community-based learning. Kimberly gives voice to the ways the internal shifts in her self-perception led to external changes in her relationship to the world:

I never knew I would become a social worker. I never knew I would become a domestic violence and sexual assault victim advocate. I never pictured myself standing in front of groups of people armed with PowerPoints full of statistics and my own powerful perspectives...At the end of our course we were asked what metaphor comes to mind in relation to being an agent of change. I couldn’t think of an inspiring or creative metaphor. I couldn’t really think of a metaphor at all. What I *did* think of is what it feels like to be a genuine and true citizen. At times I felt like the Queen of Red Tape, and other times I felt like a workhorse. Mostly, though, I felt things changing...[H]aving the chance to initiate projects as I went along gave me a real sense of what it means not only to be an agent of change, but to be someone who works from their own moral center to effect that change. It is hard to move on from this class. A grouch by nature, I will genuinely miss what came to feel like a center of mutual support for so many good causes, so many examples of effecting positive change in the world. (Reitenauer, Korzun, Lane, & Roberts, 2016)

These are the rewards inherent in this approach—both the interior and exterior expressions of an education that is truly claimed, engaged, and owned by our students. I know that we both feel deeply honored to companion students as they do this claiming, and to be companioned by them as we continue to learn, practice, and change, as well.

How fortunate we are, and how privileged, to get to do this real and necessary work of engaging courageously and authentically with each other across difference as we seek to create the world we wish to inhabit. As collaborators in this work with our students and with each other, we look forward to widening the community of practitioners committed to catalyzing the transformative power of engaged and participatory pedagogies. We welcome ongoing dialogue with our readers in the effort to expand upon and strengthen the practice of supporting students in claiming their education, their lives, and their rightful places in our world.

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