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Teaching for Change: Articulating, Profiling, and Assessing Transformative Learning Through Communicative Capabilities

Kate G. Willink¹ and Jeanne M. Jacobs¹

Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between communication pedagogy, notions of change, and assessment. The authors draw on our teaching experiences and student writings in electronic portfolios (e-portfolios) collected during a 2-year research project on the scholarship of teaching and learning in communication. Our research contributes a framework for understanding transformative learning comprised of four communicative capabilities—emotional discernment, openness, dialogue, and reflection—that emerged both from existing literature and from analysis of student e-portfolios. The authors advance a new conceptualization of communication terms to enhance educators' thinking, teaching, and assessment of transformation in the classroom. The authors argue for a more robust and meaningful approach to counting change—a vision urgently needed in the current climate of institutional assessment.

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Communication pedagogy often contains an implicit, if not explicit, transformational agenda—whether it illuminates oppression, creates dialogues across differences, advocates for social justice, or engages in community-based learning. Communication pedagogies that engage in transformative learning include: service learning (e.g., Endres & Gould, 2009) and critical service learning (e.g., Cooks & Scharrer, 2006); social justice and activism pedagogy (e.g., Frey & Carragee, 2007); embodied communication pedagogy and playback theater (e.g., Park-Fuller, 2003); and critical communication pedagogy (e.g., Fassett & Warren, 2007, 2010).

While the communication discipline possesses an expanding catalogue of scholarship on communication pedagogy, communication educators often lack the ability to articulate, profile, and assess students' transformations. As communication educators committed to transformative learning, we recognize the need for enhanced abilities to recognize changes in our students. We ask ourselves: How can we recognize and assess individual transformations, particularly in a single-semester course with forty (or more) students? What should count as change: Shifts in thought? In behavior? In social action outside the classroom? How does personal transformation fit into assessment if students have “different learning styles, skills, histories, philosophies of life, attitudes, values, expectations, and perspectives” (Cone & Harris, 1996, p. 46)? How can transformation be measured? Should we consider transformation at all? This essay begins to address these difficult questions by adding to the tradition of transformative learning through exploring the relationship between communication pedagogy, notions of change that undergird these approaches, and assessment of teaching and learning.

The goal of transformative learning is to make “frames of reference more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change” (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006, p. 124). Transformation, therefore, relies broadly on “the ability to affect and be affected” (Massumi, 2002, p. 15). In this essay, our conceptualization of transformative learning includes personal and social change—from subtle shifts to bold actions—acknowledging such learning as a dynamic but recognizable nonlinear, often iterative, process model of change. In other words, our definition of transformation is inclusive: It includes learning how to work to create social change in collaboration with community partners, a commitment to change oneself, as well as adoption of new ideas. We agree with Brookfield (2000) that “the act of learning can be called transformative only if it involves a fundamental questioning or reordering of how one thinks or acts” (p. 139). And we would add feels. Finally, we believe that while transformation is never static, as educators we can articulate and profile its movement.

This article draws on our own teaching experiences and student writings in electronic portfolios (e-portfolios) collected during a 2-year research project on the

scholarship of teaching and learning in communication (SOTL/C) conducted by Kate in three of her Advanced Intercultural Communication courses (Darling, 2003).¹ The SOTL/C research aimed to profile and articulate student transformation in order to better understand the transformative learning process. In existing literature, articulating, profiling, and assessing transformative learning are understood as interdependent but have rarely been examined together. By specifically focusing on capabilities, this research sought to advance a more nuanced conceptualization of familiar terms for transformative learning from a communication perspective. We offer a process-driven (not product-driven) approach to understanding and assessing transformative learning.

Kate deliberately did not tell students that she was looking for transformation in their e-portfolios because (1) students are adept at telling progress narratives and would likely do so if they thought it would earn a higher grade; (2) her research aimed to assess student learning, not to ask students to show transformations; and (3) particularly when dealing with change in any area, the possibility of a teacher going beyond an instructional role into that of moral adjudicator is a slippery slope that has to be tread carefully. We want to be clear that Kate was not interested in grading transformation. She aimed to assess whether the goals of the course were reached and to understand if the pedagogy and modes of assessment employed could cultivate transformative learning.

Our central research challenge was accounting for student movement toward change and evaluating it processually instead of turning the transformational learning process into a beginning and end state, which traditional assessment measures track, such as competency, content learning, and static developmental models. Our research contributes a framework for understanding transformative learning comprised of four communicative capacities that emerged from the literature and the e-portfolios. In this essay, we begin by making a case for assessment as a critical battleground for communication scholars, as well as other scholars in the humanities and social science disciplines, who practice transformative learning. We then explain the research data and design. Finally, we offer as our findings four communicative capacities to help educators from any discipline begin to articulate and profile transformative learning in their classes.

Communicating on Our Own Terms: The Importance of Assessment

At first glance, assessment appears an unlikely focus for educators committed to social change and social justice. Yet assessment—which constrains or enables our own ability to account for the value of what and how we teach—is critical to education as a means for change. Engaging assessment requires a substantive engagement with the critiques and possibilities of the assessment movement in higher education.

Critiques of Assessment

There are important institutional reasons why educators resist assessment. Many educators consider assessment to be a control mechanism that impinges on academic freedom and faculty governance (e.g., Andrade, 2011; Carpenter & Bach, 2010; Fendrich, 2007; Rhoades, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). To many, assessment appears as a manifestation of market ideologies (e.g., Amaral, Rosa, & Tavares, 2006; Slaughter & Leslie, 2001). Slaughter and Rhoades, for instance, call assessment an “academic capitalist knowledge regime” at the expense of the “public good knowledge regime.” Assessment is often a top-down initiative that favors traditional classrooms (e.g., lectures and textbooks) and modes of summative assessment (e.g., multiple choice testing and term-papers) based on broad university-driven standards and learning outcomes.

Assessment can create structural impediments to transformational learning through what it chooses to measure, how that gets tied to faculty evaluation, or the ways it promotes “bean counting” and sucks faculty time away from innovative teaching. Limiting top-down assessments are entirely disconnected from questions that truly interest many faculty, such as, what are my students learning and how do I know it? As educators, we can reframe the assessment movement to focus on what we care about—transformation.

The Power and Possibilities of Assessment

However unpopular, assessment is unavoidable in higher education: “‘To assess or not to assess’ is not the question . . . we confront the dilemma of whether to assert our role in and ownership of the assessment process or whether to allow external agents to impose their vision of assessment on us” (Cameron, Stavenhagen-Helgren, Walsh, & Kobritz, 2002, p. 414). Student learning is shaped by assessment and thus judgment falls squarely in the domain of educators:

Assessment defines for students what is important, it identifies for them what counts, it has a big influence on how they will spend their time and how they will see themselves as learners. Thus, if you want to change student learning, then change the methods of assessment. (Brown, Bull, & Pendlebury, 1997, p. 6)

Educators committed to transformation benefit from engaging assessment because of its powerful influences on students, teaching and learning, and on educational institutions.

Scholars would benefit from further developing our own methods of assessment because traditional methods fail to capture the complexity of transformative learning (e.g., it is difficult to demonstrate affective learning or social change in a quiz). Many social justice teachers would welcome assessment methods that show us if our pedagogies are producing our desired results. In addition, new effective assessment methods would help us increase the types of teaching and learning that count at our

institutions. “Assessment is both the single-most important gauge of learning that drives the educational process and the most effective means of implementing institutional change” (Cullen & Harris, 2009, p. 115).

There are many dangers to not setting the terms with which we count change (Shulman, 2007). As Heron (1981) argues, “Assessment is the most political of all the educational processes: it is the area where issues of power are most at stake” (p. 63). In this article, we begin to imagine our own assessment approach that remains faithful to several decades of theoretical and pedagogical developments in the communication discipline, specifically: (1) constitutive communication scholarship (e.g., Nainby, Warren, & Bollinger, 2003; Stewart, 1995); (2) ethical and political theories of communication (e.g., Deetz, 1992; Frey, 1998; Schwarz, 2008); and (3) critical pedagogy (e.g., Fassett & Warren, 2007, 2010). A mode of assessment that is true to these principles and practices requires new approaches.

We offer two conceptual interventions into assessment scholarship necessary to develop an assessment approach in line with our disciplinary commitments. First, we need to develop a model of assessment that articulates and profiles the learning process. Many models of assessment measure changes in state or being. We cannot rely on approaches to assessment that translate forms of becoming (a constitutive, transformational process) into states of being, as if we become unequivocally and unchangeably into a static something else (a new state). For example, many developmental models posit a trajectory where students evolve from a lesser-developed state to a more desirable, often morally superior, enlightened end-state. Because we are trying to understand a process, or what Contestable (2010) calls “becoming-learning,” our model has to assess becoming.

Our second, and related, argument is that process-based assessment should focus on better understanding potential in learning—what Massumi (2002) calls indeterminate personal and social metamorphic potential. Most assessment focuses on possibility, creating accounts of student learning based on determined outcomes that prescript learning, and create implicit and explicit norms to judge change. For Massumi, possibility is a retrospectively constructed account for the knowable and imaginable paths to an outcome. In this way, the possible connects to the normative, thereby limiting our understandings of what could be. Much of this work is located in scholarship on being, or what Massumi calls the reconditionings of the emerged.

We argue for the development of assessment of transformative learning as scholarship on becoming or potentiality. Potential involves the latent—the unknowable and unimaginable; that which is capable of being or becoming but is not yet in existence. Potential contrasts to the actual and precedes the possible. Unlike the possible, we cannot tell where potential is going. Potential, tied to the what-is-yet-to-be, contains a variety of capabilities that have yet to be defined by their destination. If assessment scholarship takes potential seriously, we require a framework that articulates and profiles the potentiality of transformative learning while still acknowledging the “still indeterminate variation” of teaching and learning. This approach to process and potential allows us to think of transformation in a way that

is not tied to any substantive politics and to avoid grading on whether or not students have transformed.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Research Goals, Design, and Method

This research grew out of two instructional challenges Kate faced when teaching advanced intercultural communication courses: (1) How do you prepare students not only with knowledge about other cultures but also the conceptual, affective, and reflective wisdom to negotiate real-life intercultural communication? and (2) How do you assess learning in a diverse class where students possess different entry-level knowledge and experiences? To begin to meet these challenges, Kate combined innovative instructional design for intercultural communication and began a 2-year scholarship of teaching and learning study of three advanced intercultural courses she taught at a 4-year public university in Canada. The central issue for this project was how to articulate and profile the intellectual and affective transformations in students' intercultural understanding in order to better foster classroom learning, document teaching methods, and develop appropriate assessment methods.

In order to understand how this course design and assessment method affected teaching and learning, Kate assigned a learning e-portfolio. The e-portfolio is an online representation of student learning processes that incorporate texts and multimedia resources, providing a complex, rigorous method for assessing student learning. The primary data source for this research is the entries in e-portfolios that students made throughout the semester-long courses. The e-portfolio, however, is not a panacea for the challenges of fostering and assessing transformation in the classroom. It is important to embed the e-portfolio with other pedagogical approaches. E-portfolio content emerged from in-class discussions, reflective practice through journaling, and through "reading in retrograde motion" assignments that required students to reread several articles throughout the semester for deeper understanding. Kate cultivated trust and deeper reflection through open and continual dialogue with her students in class and in response to their journals and written assignments.

Kate chose three themes for the e-portfolio assignment in order to deepen students' engagement with course material and promote transformative learning. This assignment cultivated sustained student reflection (Zubizarreta, 2004): Students created context for their e-portfolios, described their learning processes and evolution over time, explained their learning and how they accomplished it, and connected their learning to course objectives. The first theme, *Inspired Insights*, asks students to identify specific course readings that were most valuable to them and how they may use this knowledge in the future. The second theme, *Magnificent Failures*, motivates students to learn from their mistakes or "to learn when their current knowledge is insufficient to solve an interesting problem" (McGonigal, 2005).

The third theme, *Unanticipated Connections*, encourages students to pay attention to the diversity of catalysts in the learning process, including situations outside of formal schooling, and to the relational nature of learning done in community with others and shaped by social and cultural contexts.

By encouraging students to integrate learning in nontraditional ways, these themes expand what counts as learning, where learning occurs, and how students demonstrate understanding. E-portfolios highlight what the students know, what learning is important to them, what the teacher thought she taught, and what students learned. Above all, the assessment and its themes demonstrate that transformational learning took place, which “makes it count” to institutional audiences.

At the conclusion of the research project, data collection included the e-portfolios of a diverse group of 55 juniors and seniors. Kate developed a series of four research collaborations over 4 years, ending in a 1-year partnership with Jeanne. Since our primary research goal was to develop a model of assessment that focused on the process of learning rather than its products, we chose to conduct an inductive and deductive thematic analysis. Combining these two interpretive approaches enabled us to inductively identify codes emerging directly from student e-portfolios (Boyatzis, 1998), while also working deductively with theoretical concepts identified in the literature on communication and transformative learning (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

We applied Owens (1984) three criteria for a systematic approach to inductively identify themes: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. The criterion of recurrence is satisfied when similar ideas or meanings are expressed in more than two texts, although different language may be used. Repetition is similar to recurrence, however, whereas recurrence refers to implicit repeated examples of ideas and meanings, repetition is the “explicit repeated use of the same wording” (Owens, p. 275). Forcefulness is found in the formatting of the text wherein the writer emphasizes ideas and meanings through the use of different fonts, italics, boldface, underlining, or punctuation.

Synthesizing the literature on communication and transformative learning, each of us independently identified key themes representing the communicative capabilities of transformative learning present in the corpus of e-portfolios.² Kate identified six themes, and Jeanne identified seven. Through discussion, we agreed on six themes; however, after further analysis, we were able to collapse them into four themes that described key communicative capabilities present in the process of transformative learning. Once each capability had been clearly articulated, we carefully reviewed the student e-portfolios again in order to corroborate the coded-themes and find exemplars of each that demonstrated students’ transformational learning processes.

Communicative Capabilities of Transformative Learning

Nobel-prize winning economist Sen (1985) and political philosopher Nussbaum (2000) initiated a paradigm shift when they moved away from deficit models of

poverty and economics (focusing on income and resources) and developed a capability approach to human development (based on the human development index, e.g., affiliation or bodily health). Inspired by this shift, we translate their concept of capability to our assessment scholarship as a way to move beyond competency-based assessment. Capability—“the ability to achieve” (Sen, 1985, p. 26)—is an attempt to understand the multidimensional nature of human well-being and highlights “freedom—the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead” (Drèze & Sen, 1995, p. 10). The capability approach aims to understand human potential and ability—modes of acting and becoming—rather than simply assessing people’s present functional achievement. Through the four communicative capabilities discussed below, we seek to create a framework to articulate and profile students’ communicative capabilities as critical to understanding transformative learning.

We highlight four key capabilities of transformative teaching and learning: emotional discernment, openness, dialogue, and reflection. Each of these qualities is communicative in nature. While we treat these capabilities as discrete, in practice they are connected. We explain each capability inductively through selections of the strongest exemplars of student writing that best illustrate each concept so that teachers can better recognize these capabilities in their own students. We conclude with recommendations for recognizing and profiling each capability of transformative learning.

Learners Demonstrate the Capability of Emotional Discernment by Recognizing, Reflecting on, and Analyzing How Their Own and Others’ Emotional Investments Shape Communicative Encounters

Auravelia’s e-portfolio entry articulates one aspect of the capability of emotional discernment—the recognition that emotions circulate in educational environments:

Our class discussions are very engaging, especially when they become heated debates. Sometimes you might have a lot of support on an issue and other times you might be alone. It’s interesting to hear other opinions and the reasoning to back them up . . . Emotions always come into play and rebuttals become very personal. We lose our temper and become defensive. We may sometimes say things we would not otherwise have said. I can definitely attest to reacting this way and I think this has been one of my biggest failures in this class.

Auravelia notices that classroom discussions often become emotionally charged when students are asked to interrogate the assumptions underlying their closely held beliefs and values. Her entry also brings to life the ways in which emotions intensify and circulate around contested topics. She regrets that these negative reactions trouble communicative interactions. Auravelia continues:

The particular incident that comes to mind is the debate that extended from the Sharia law discussion. The question that I talked about commented on the Pope's and Canadian law's view on homosexuality and asked how these opposing views could be overcome and how they affect intercultural communication. I was having a really bad day and I was quite moody and tired. It was not a good idea to engage in a heated debate since I was already fairly emotional to begin with. Unfortunately, I was not able to express what I wanted to say and I probably came across as an intolerant crazy religious nut. The discussion became a debate on homosexuality and I felt forced to convey my beliefs with conviction, becoming very defensive at the responses of my classmates. This led me to say other things that I regretted when addressing their reactions.

Here, Auravelia acknowledges that she entered the classroom with emotional pretexts (Knight-Diop & Oesterreich, 2009) that influenced the tone and content of her classroom interaction. Additionally, the emotional investments undergirding Auravelia's worldview limited her openness to the opinions of other members of the classroom community. Her regrets about what she said during the class discussion are not surprising in light of the common assumption that "learning is primarily and wholly rational" (Simpson, 2008, p. 183), and that emotions do not have a legitimate space in the classroom (e.g., Hart, 2001). Auravelia completes her entry by acknowledging what she learned from this experience:

I felt terrible for being the aggressor while at the same time feeling terrible for being the one attacked for my views. In fact I was very bothered by what happened for several days. Nonetheless, it became a very powerful learning experience as I realized the importance of dialoging with patience and tolerance. I also realized how important it is to control my emotions as it impedes me from communicating what I want to get across.

Auravelia reveals her belief that emotions, especially negative ones, can be unproductive. While anger and defensiveness can sometimes bring generative conversations to a halt, her reflection demonstrates that emotions can "offer a responsible accountability for how these emotional investments shape one's actions, and how one's actions affect others" (Boler, 1999, p. 198). Although the classroom incident probably did not change her views, Auravelia did learn that her religious beliefs are undergirded by strong emotions, and that her feelings influence how *and* what she communicates. Her entry serves as an exemplar of the capacity for emotional discernment in that she becomes able to distance herself from the power of her own convictions, interrogate her emotional investments, and enter into a dialogue about a deeply held belief, entertaining others' beliefs as reasonable.

Emotions are often the "starting point for critical inquiry" (Boler, 1999, p. 119), therefore, discerning one's feelings is vital to learning. As Auravelia's e-portfolio entry illustrates the inability to discern feelings can make students vulnerable to "affective flotsam" (Brennan, 2004, p. 94); a wild ride of uncontrollable emotions that take their toll on selves and others. When students are unable or unwilling to

discern feelings, they are likely to overlook significant emotional pretexts and investments that close them off to course content, texts, reflections, and new ideas. Discernment is the process whereby emotions pass from sensory registration to cognitive reflection (Brennan, 2004, p. 120). For discernment to occur, it is important to recognize emotions and the impact they have on self and others as Auravelia does.

Auravelia demonstrates key aspects of emotional discernment: that students (and teachers) bring emotional pretexts and investments into class; that emotions emerge from classroom experiences and course assignments; that emotions flow energetically between and among teachers and students; that analyzing emotions is an integral part of the learning process; and that emotionally charged encounters influence students' receptivity to other people's perspectives and opinions.

Educators can profile emotional discernment by focusing on emotional words and intense feelings expressed during classroom discussions and within student writing. Emotional reactions to course content and activities, however, does not equate to discernment. For emotional discernment to occur, students must acknowledge the feelings that are attached to their beliefs and values and recognize that these feelings may impact their ability to open themselves to beliefs and values that are different from their own. When students show evidence that they have reflected upon and analyzed how emotions influence their willingness to consider new ideas, the power of emotion to spark transformative learning becomes apparent.

Learners Demonstrate the Capability of Openness by Remaining Receptive to New Ideas, Dwelling in Uncertainty, and Avoiding Premature Judgments of Complex Issues

Craig's e-portfolio entry articulates what we mean by the capability of openness and speaks to the ways in which courses that encourage openness place unexpected demands on students:

The difficult part about taking on a course like this one, Intercultural Communication, is the inevitability of disruption. If you study calculus, nano-tech engineering, astronomy, or accounting, there's a pretty good chance that you're going to learn a lot. You'll memorize some formulas, learn some techniques, and practice them all to death, but at some point in the day you're going to set down your books, turn off the computer, and head out the door for a pint, remaining much the same person you were before you opened those books—perhaps a little smarter with a better chance at making grad-school. When you study intercultural communication, you can close your books, but you can't close the doors that they've opened in your brain.

Craig's entry illustrates that compared to more traditional courses, critical communication courses not only require student receptivity but they also often create sites of rupture that can open students involuntarily. This openness often leads

to an experience with contingency—an “untidy process” of investigating different, often conflicting, knowledge (Kincheloe, 2008). Later in the semester, Craig writes:

There is an interesting realization that I’ve been slowly coming to lately, but one that is significantly profound: I am not always right. I’m not sure exactly why I thought I was right, or how I came to think it, but I’ve realized lately that I tend to lend my ideas and opinions substantially more weight than I give to others’ ideas and opinions. Another peculiar thing is that the more experience I have, or education I get, the more I believe this. The fact, however, is that my way of doing things isn’t the best, and thinking that it is not only makes me look like an ass, but it prevents me from seeing alternatives.

Unlike traditional teaching where knowledge is viewed as something to accumulate, education in communication often challenges students to question their existing knowledge, a process that often loosens their armor of self-confidence (Kegan, 2000). Students are expected to reconsider not only *what* they know, but *how* they know to examine the sources and assumptions behind their ideas and values. Openness is characterized by intellectual and emotional uncertainty (McWhinney & Markos, 2003). Craig’s self-reflexivity suggests a nascent openness to new perspectives, prompted by course readings and discussions that are leading him to broader understandings.

Another student, Frances, demonstrates how the capability for openness depends on humility and careful listening:

I chose to reexamine *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. I agree that White people have certain privileges that other racial groups do not have. However, I think geographic location is not just intricately intertwined, but critical to racial dominance. Depending where these White people are located they do have certain dominate powers over the rest of the population. When I first read the article, I could not see these additional White privileges. As I read the list, I saw myself in [McIntosh’s] perspective; thus, making the list seems inappropriate because I am a visible minority. After handing in my reflective comment, I mentioned the list to my roommate who is half Chinese and from a small town, and she said “You’re from Toronto! Of course, you can see yourself with the same privileges as the White people.” As I thought about this I realized that my Toronto surroundings are the reason why I associate with the items in the White person’s backpack. This also gives me the arbitrary power of a White person.

I have lived in the Asian area of Toronto all my life and because of this upbringing my invisible backpack is filled with the same items as a White person. I have grown up believing that race does not hinder me in achieving my goals or that I will not be prosecuted because of my skin colour. This perception made me realize that McIntosh’s knapsack is not the invisible backpack of White people but of the dominating racial group.

Through her openness to her friend’s perspectives, Frances demonstrates that critical communication courses require more than receptivity to new ideas and ways of

thinking (Berger, 2004)—they require a humility to recognize that one’s beliefs may be flawed or incomplete (e.g., Johnson & Bhatt, 2003). By listening to and considering her friend’s perspectives, Frances broadens her understandings (Boler, 1999; Boyd & Myers, 1988), nuances her initial thoughts, and extends McIntosh’s ideas as she realizes how her experiences have shaped her response to the article.

In the following e-portfolio excerpt, Curtis discloses an experience with openness:

I really have to take a critical look at what is going on in the world. For one reason or another the Sundown Towns article pieced together all the other readings in a personal way. Issues like why Augusta National shouldn’t be a men’s only golf course. I once argued with people about how it’s just guys needing a place for the guys and even though part of me still thinks it’s absurd that there can’t be a men’s club, there is now a more intellectual part of me that lets me know why it’s not okay, and because of this class and the readings I have better arguments of why not than why, more educated and less biased arguments: arguments that understand institutionalized racism and White privilege. I am closer to having an impartial view of society. I say closer because it’s not perfect yet, and it may never be. There may always be a part of me that thinks, for lack of a better example, a gentlemen’s club is a really great idea, but as long as I recognize that as a thought, something short of action, as long as I have the tools to see or find out why that may not be the best idea, I’m better off than when I started.

Curtis’ entry reveals a student who is willing to stand at the edge of his understanding (Berger, 2004). He documents an experience with cognitive dissonance (Gorski, 2009)—allowing course readings to challenge his earlier certainty and recognizing that ethical dilemmas are “intrinsically paradoxical” (Boler, 1999, p. 197). Curtis defers closure and avoids snap judgments on the issue as he tries to reconcile his previous support of men-only clubs in light of his new understanding of institutional racism and White privilege. Curtis’ honesty about his struggles over this issue, and his willingness to question his beliefs without feigning change, demonstrate the power of openness to move students toward change without demanding they adopt specific perspectives. Curtis demonstrates that openness is neither a cop-out nor an unwillingness to commit to a position; it is part of a learning process that takes judgment seriously.

Educators can recognize and assess students’ capabilities for openness by noticing whether they are open and willing to examine the limits of existing beliefs, values, attitudes, and knowledge, as well as the frequency and intensity of such moments. From classroom discussions and reflective essays, educators can identify students’ willingness to ask questions to which they do not know the answers (Feito, 2007; Hart, 2001); dwell in uncertainty (Berger, 2004; Boler, 1999); modify assumptions and interpretations (McWhinney & Markos, 2003); avoid entrenched positions; and to defer closure. In educational environments where certainty has previously been expected and rewarded, asking students to stand at the edges of their understanding requires teacher patience and student courage, and vice versa.

Students Demonstrate the Capability of Dialogue by Reflecting on Their Own Positionalities, Listening to Others' Perspectives, and Negotiating Shared Meaning

Curtis' e-portfolio entry articulates what we mean by the capability for dialogue:

It must have been a few weeks into the class when you asked me to answer the first question I wrote in this class.³ I was astonished to say the least. The question: how do you ignite the same passion for pro life [post 9/11] that the United States showed for revenge, how do you, as Suheir Hammad said, "affirm life"?

My comments to you were to say that I thought that I was farther from finding the answer then when I started the class. I remember feeling so overwhelmed. I wrote how I felt that King was right on the mark in saying that our society was telling different stories. Stories so different that maybe a bridge was impossible to build between the two.

I think you could look back and say that it was wrong to think that I was further from the truth then before I started the class. But I wouldn't say that's necessarily true. The fact that I felt farther away from the truth is just recognition of the distance that needed to be traveled. Had I not felt this way I don't believe that I would have really understood the message or myself. I wouldn't have been able to grasp as clear a picture of pre and post knowledge.

Here Curtis anticipates Kate's assessment and crafts an alternate response. Curtis' entry reveals how inner dialogue can be shaped by previous conversations with others. Dialogue is a process of knowledge creation in which interlocutors "project themselves socially and emotionally" (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006, p. 139), narrate, and negotiate shared meaning through conversation within power-laden contexts (Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2006). Often these interactions, driven by a desire to learn, generate dissonance, epiphanies, reflections, and new perspectives as experiences, ideas, and emotions interact in unexpected ways (Ziegler et al., 2006). As Feito (2007) points out, "new thinking becomes real within social interaction before it becomes internalized in an individual's cognitive capacities" (p. 1). In the classroom, dialogue leads toward a deeper, multiperspectival understanding that becomes a catalyst for change.

He continues:

I believe that students who take this class need to bring an ability to separate themselves from the knowledge gained in the text. Remove yourself, your ideas and read, listen. Then you can go back and take a more active look at understanding . . . After you can go back, compare and contrast. Identify weakness in your outlook and maybe the reading.

Curtis engages the course readings as interlocutors. In his final presentation, he commented that his peers and the caliber of class discussions spurred him to read more carefully. In this way, dialogue reverberates between classroom discussions, course

readings, and student–teacher interactions to generate new understandings. Transformative dialogue requires skills, sensitivities, and insights that Curtis demonstrates including, “having an open mind, learning to listen empathetically, ‘bracketing’ premature judgment, and seeking common ground” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60). Such dialogues require student openness including humility and courage and a willingness to abide unknowing (e.g., Simpson, 2008). When approached in this spirit, dialogic learning can be transformative and underscores the relational, collaborative nature of learning (Percy, 2005). Curtis continues:

I don’t think that I took Kings comments as he had intended them. Partly because we read the chapters individually and partly because of where I was as a person. I saw such a bleak outlook because I was seeing such a lack of information and vision in myself. King was pointing out that our world is stories. Not a story. We create our world and Hamera may have said it best when she said that “storytelling changes things” but by the time we realize it, we are already enmeshed in a world of stories. King just wanted to point out the stories a little sooner.

So what has changed you ask? How is this my magnificent failure? I changed. I have a better answer.

Here, Curtis moves toward the social—to larger national conversations on September 11 and poet Suheir Hammad’s call for people to affirm life after this tragedy. Dialogue calls on all participants to relate to others and to constantly reflect on their positionalities (Simpson, 2008). In critical classrooms, dialogue “is often a negotiation between boldly claimed positions of privilege and domination, and critiques of such privilege and inequitable social relations” (Simpson, p. 184). This form of dialogue generates emotional responses from many students as it challenges much of their traditional education (Leonardo, 2008); implicates their embodied investments in privilege and social inequality (e.g., Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008); introduces new knowledge and unfamiliar experiences into Whitestream classes (e.g., Urrieta, 2005); scrutinizes taken-for-granted norms of Whiteness, meritocracy, and colorblindness (e.g., Chubbuck, 2004); and shifts the balance of power to include previously silenced voices. While Curtis turns toward social problems, he brings his new understandings to bear:

You don’t need to change people. Looking at September 11th I saw a country of so many people, so many individuals and such passion, but during a situation like that you don’t have to change the people. You just change the story. I think now, a situation like that may be easier to change than something as everyday as racism. The ability to tell any story is there from the start. You have a situation in its creation. Revenge started with the Government. That was the story they told and that was the story the people embraced. If the story is affirm life from the start, then maybe the entire attitude changes. Finally, I don’t feel as insignificant as I did at the beginning. Some things can change, even one person, one day and one story at a time.

Smith said that many people who work in race relations do so from “the point of view of [their] own ethnicity. This very fact inhibits [their] ability to hear more voices than those that are closest.” I believe that I have gained the ability to see from more than my point of view. This gives me the opportunity to speak to those closest to me, those most privileged and maybe those who are hardest to get to. Yesterday I sat at the Johnstown Chiefs game. Their mascot, a stereotypical Indian, ran in front of a teammate and me. He laughed, looked at me. I didn’t laugh. I was legitimately angry. “What?” he says. “You can’t do that.” “What?” again he says. “You can’t stereotype the #\$\$ out of somebody, turn them into a symbol for your team, and parade them around.” He gave me a blank stare. “Rouss (short for Roussin, a French born player),” I said, “What if a team in Alberta called themselves the Voyageurs and had an oversize headed French painter with a moustache and a cigarette who ran around saying, ‘oui, oui’.” He was as angry at me as I was at the mascot for a second, and then, “@#\$\$%,” he said. “I know,” I told him, and I know for that second at least, I helped change his view.

As a result of an iterative dialogic learning process, Curtis ends his entry by extending his course learning, including the topic of American Indian mascots and engages a friend in a moment of dialogue that changes his friend’s interpretation, how Curtis sees himself, and his potential for change in the world.

We can assess the process of dialogue and its transformative potential in e-portfolios when students reflect on conversations they have with others—teachers, classmates, friends, even total strangers—that may have transformed their understandings. We can see something traditional assessment does not reveal, the way in which such dialogic learning can become a part of social change outside the university.

Students Demonstrate the Capability of Reflection by Gaining A Deeper Understanding of Their Own and Others’ Perspectives and Creating New Ways of Thinking

Lindsey’s e-portfolio entry demonstrates the capabilities of transformative reflection:

The article I have chosen to read again and examine is Maria Lugones’ “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception.” I chose to re-read this article again, because after the first time I read it something stuck out to me. After a drama class where my drama teacher said that no one is innately shy, I was troubled thinking back to this article to realize that I indeed choose whom I will be “playful” with. The article describes how specifically White women want women of color out of their field of vision. I was confused as to where the author constructed this idea. While I do not identify with blocking other culturally and racially different women out of my field of vision, I do see how we often see ourselves as different, and see the foreign other as unreachable. Sometimes to understand this Other takes time, and sometimes that time is unavailable. It becomes a what do “they” have to offer “me” issue. I sometimes feel this way regarding playfulness. Who will, or will I not let my guard down with, and be

my playful self with. The question I have since been posing to myself is: Is it loving to withhold ones playfulness depending on who we are with?

The first part of this entry shows how certain ideas resonate (Hart, 2001) and sustain reflection. Lindsey's reflection integrates the Lugones article, her drama class, and her past performances of playfulness. She moves beyond ideas previously dismissed as confusing to reflect on how she excludes "others" from her playful self, coming to a new understanding of the reading and of her relational ethics. Reflection is an essential opportunity for learning, especially after we make mistakes, have uncomfortable experiences, renegotiate our identities, or reexamine previously held beliefs. Reflective learning entails a metacognitive understanding of an experience and of its meaning (e.g., Yancey, 1998). Lindsay demonstrates reflection through questioning assumptions, using new lenses, and gaining other perspectives on her perspective. She continues:

I believe the answer to this question is no. If we are choosing who, and who we will not truly engage with, we are deciding who is important enough for our time. In not identifying with other, and according to this article me as a White/Anglo women, not engaging means you will not identify with the other, and therefore reveals a real lack of concern for the other. We cannot love in this isolated independence.

The article goes on to describe an outsider's view of what Whiteness means. . . . When I first read this article the perspective of her looking at Whiteness as a barrier to integration was disregarded because I was unsure of its significance. However now I see that it is a main issue in this article. She describes at the beginning of the article the ability to shift between the mainstream of Whiteness culture, and back to where she is most comfortable in her homeplace. This is interesting to think that this Whiteness is a mainstream culture because still the question is posed, what is Whiteness? And why is it so powerful, that people feel they must travel to and from it? She describes the White world as hostile, and traveling back and forth between her world has removed from her the ability to be loving.

The author poses an interesting question about what it would be like to love women who have been unharmed, and untouched by arrogant perception. Whiteness in part keeps "them" (White women) innately unable to love women across racial and cultural boundaries. This severe separation between 'us' and 'them' seems to be the main issue that keeps women from fully engaging with each other. Cultural boundaries seem to be a wide divide that keeps people from both sides away.

Lindsey recovers a key concept that she initially missed. Upon reflection, she sees why Whiteness matters and how it maintains cultural differences. Transformative reflection ideally involves "reflection that takes the learner to the edge of their meaning, creating new forms of thinking, new discoveries" (Berger, 2004, p. 338). Reflection involves rethinking beliefs and emotional investments in order to generate new understandings. She concludes:

I think by more consciously evaluating why we choose not to associate or befriend and engage certain people will decrease the divide that the author states to be present. By consciously wanting to be a part of other people's world we will ensure no one's world becomes an entity unto itself, but permeable by everyone, without the feeling of having entered into a hostile world. As a White woman, I feel like I have some responsibility in part to give up some of my perceived rights as a White woman, and allow the cultural divide of arrogant perception to subside.

By integrating the readings, her experiences, and past actions, Lindsey realizes the limitations of her original perspective and the additional responsibilities of a White woman. Our pedagogy builds reflexivity through recursive self-reflection—moving students toward deeper knowledge where they revisit and revise their learning. In the best cases, students move “beyond reflection into the realm . . . of acting for change” (Hicks, Berger, & Generett, 2005, p. 61).

When assessing transformative reflection teachers can find such evidence as student commitment to learning that entails personal costs; integrative learning; the ability to consider and yet continue to challenge other perspectives; and a persistence to strive for deeper understanding. Through reflection, students' abilities to challenge themselves and change perspectives become apparent.

Conclusion: The Discomforts of Transformation

This essay offers steps toward a nuanced vocabulary for understanding and assessing change, suggests a portfolio approach to assessment, and provides examples of student transformations. Taken together, these resources can provide educators with fuller answers—informed by pedagogical and assessment rationale—to questions on why we teach for transformation and how we know this approach to pedagogy matters.

Student discomfort emerges as a thread throughout transformative learning. Critical courses often unsettle the participants, most noticeably in moments of cognitive dissonance and resistance. Though often demanding for students as well as teachers, these experiences contain powerful and enduring opportunities for transformation.

Transformative learning moves beyond the classroom, as revealed by Craig's comments:

It was two days before my portfolio presentation, and just when I thought that this class was winding down, that my times of reflection and engagement were coming to an end, I had a startling discovery: this class might not ever end. I mean there I was, innocently watching a film with some friends, relaxing on the couch, but all I could hear was [Kate's] disembodied voice speaking over the script of the film, forcing me to connect what I was seeing on screen to what I had heard in class.

For rewards like these, we educators commit to labor in discomfort, abide dissonance, and accept additional teaching and learning demands, and get caught up in the process of change ourselves.

We have found the holistic and embedded pedagogy and assessment we advocate makes teaching harder yet more rewarding: “Innovative assessment is also about what Heron (1981) called ‘*the redistribution of educational power*’ when assessment becomes not just something which is ‘done to’ learners but also ‘done with’ and ‘done by’ learners (Harris and Bell, 1990)” (Innovative Student Assessment, 2005, p. 1). The demands are profoundly relational—necessitating deep engagement of students and teachers with each other and the world around them. As educators, the pedagogy and assessment framework we recommend demands that we trust our students in new ways. We have found that increased relationality requires our faith in students’ capacities to build and sustain a collaborative classroom culture; their desire to be in relation with us; and their inventive abilities to demonstrate their learning.

The four communicative capabilities for transformative learning presented in this essay represent a new perspective for understanding and assessing change in communication courses as well as other courses in the humanities and social sciences. We advance a new conceptualization of communication terms to enhance educators’ thinking, teaching, and assessment of transformation in the classroom. These communicative capabilities offer a framework for qualitative assessments of transformative learning; therefore, we do not operationalize assessment measures or provide assessment tools. It is our hope that the communicative capabilities for transformative learning presented in this essay inspire other educators to design pedagogies that invite students to demonstrate these subtle indicators, and to build on our framework by creating a more robust and meaningful approach to counting change—a vision urgently needed in the current climate of institutional assessment.

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Notes

1. The learning e-portfolio is designed to show “the process by which the whole (how I am) becomes gradually a part (how I was) of a new whole (how I am now) through

careful reflection and integration” (Kegan, 1994, p. 43). Remington (2005) states that the e-portfolio can be effectively used to both promote transformative learning and to provide online representation of students’ learning processes over the semester. For a sample e-portfolio, see <http://www.cfkeep.org/html/stitch.php?s=%204626598725679&id=18684948625681>.

2. Not every student e-portfolio demonstrated all four capabilities. Student performance varied within and across the four capabilities. For example, one student e-portfolio might excel at reflection but demonstrate less capability in emotional discernment. As in all assignments, certain students demonstrated the capabilities in integrative, masterful ways, while other students’ work remained superficial. As teachers, we find that by identifying these capabilities we can better design pedagogies to cultivate them and provide targeted feedback to help students improve in certain areas over the course.
3. Prior to class, students submitted “questions of the day” in which they asked questions about the readings that they wanted to discuss and answer with their classmates.

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