

Awakening to White Consciousness: Transforming Habits of Mind Through Presentational Knowing

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Abstract: Six white educators examine their relationship to whiteness and explore their unexamined assumptions by engaging in presentational knowing as a link between intellect and felt experience. The resulting expansion of knowing gives participants an opportunity to reflect on their current behaviors and actions on issues of race and racism within their personal and professional lives.

Key Words: white consciousness, transformative learning and presentational knowing

One of the marks of a truly dominant intellectual paradigm is the difficulty people have in even imagining an alternative view.

–W.T. Allen (1993)

Purpose

This paper provides a theoretical base and set of examples for how presentational knowing (Heron, 1992) can assist learners in surfacing assumptions about deeply held beliefs and practices. Assumptions that are implicit in the dominant culture's values and norms are particularly difficult to surface. People with white skin in the United States are often unaware of the full extent of the power and privilege conferred by their race. New awareness of these assumptions could give white people an opportunity to reflect on their current beliefs and behaviors related to race and racism within their personal and professional lives. Our workshop design suggests that white people can use presentational knowing as a way to surface unexamined assumptions that could influence a change in their level of awareness about the ways in which white people participate in and perpetuate white hegemony. Presentational knowing is the realm of symbolic, intuitive, imaginal knowing, where art, music, storytelling or movement explore “the underlying pattern of things” (Heron, 1992, p. 170).

Workshop Rationale

Jack Mezirow (2000), in articulating his theory on transformative learning, refers to a constellation of assumed attitudes and cultural messages as a meaning perspective or habit of mind. He says “transformation refers to a movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives” (p. 19). In her analysis of how race is perceived by dominant White society, Ruth Frankenberg (1993) describes three common meaning perspectives or habits of mind—essentialist racism, power evasiveness and race cognizance. The first, essentialist racism, describes a consciousness where races are perceived as fundamentally different and unequal within systems of white superiority. Second, power evasiveness is described as a “color-blind” point of view, which proclaims all people are essentially the same; the dominant culture takes for granted that its own norms and values are universal. Frankenberg contends that many well-intentioned white people in the United States engage in this discourse of color- or power-evasiveness. The consequence of this perspective can be the exclusion and marginalization of people of color. Finally, a person who has race cognizance as a meaning perspective is one who moves back in the direction of awareness of differences among races, and embraces those different cultural systems as equally valid. In this view, differences play a significant role in shaping institutions and personal lives. Awareness of this dynamic can influence behavior.

A key aspect of transformative learning is a process of making visible perspectives that have been invisible, engaging people in a process whereby they come to recognize the distortions and limitations in their current habits of mind and are thus able to create and integrate more appropriate ones. Challenging one's deeply held assumptions through critical reflection is a core belief and practice of transformative learning. Awakening to race cognizance is for us a process of becoming aware that maintaining "color-blindness" perpetuates racism and systems of domination by ignoring differences. When challenging a meaning perspective as central to identity as power or color evasiveness, strong denial and emotions are often provoked.

John Heron (1992) has theorized the existence of four forms of knowing—experiential, presentational, propositional and practical. Propositional knowing—typically the form most privileged in academia—represents the sphere of intellect and reason that would be most readily addressed by critical reflection. Mezirow (2000) and others recognize the importance of these additional ways of knowing, but offer little instruction of how to engage and transform them. As educators trained in the U.S., we have much less practice and experience in engaging the full array of human ways of knowing. In order to expand one's consciousness, addressing all four forms of knowing in greater balance is most useful, particularly when seeking to transform one's most deeply held beliefs, attitudes and actions.

Based on our premise that strong emotions play an important role in not only what we know but also how we learn transformatively, we extend transformative learning theory by working with imaginative and intuitive ways of knowing using creative expression. Creative expressions are a way of helping people surface material that has affective meaning (Heron, 1992).

Heron believes that by engaging all four forms of knowing in learning, greater congruence between knowledge and action is achieved. In our work, we have sought to balance our attention to Heron's four ways of knowing. To this end, we focus particular attention in this paper on Heron's concept of presentational knowing because it provides the critical link between experiential knowing and propositional knowing. Heron defines presentational knowing as the place where, "a person creates a pattern of perceptual elements – in movement, sound, colour, shape, line.... Presentational knowledge includes not only music and ... arts, but dance, movement, and mime. It also embraces all forms of myth, fable, allegory, story and drama..." (1992, p. 165-167).

Workshop Topics and Examples

The workshop will be an interactive process constructed to aid participants in exploring habits of mind that foster white hegemony. Additionally, the workshop will give participants the experience of using the imaginal mode of presentational knowing to bridge between affective responses and conceptual understanding.

In this paper, we provide five examples of presentational knowing to communicate a personal experience of surfacing an assumption about white hegemony or racism. Our presentations take the form of stories, two poems and a cartoon. Readers may have affective response to the presentations that could lead to their own identification of assumptions about race and white hegemony. The expressive mode of presentational communication connects with readers at an affective level, in contrast to an explanatory or analytic mode, which is more closely associated with discussion or critical reflection and is also more typical of our "discussion culture."

The presentational examples given in this paper are limited to what can be expressed on a printed page. A wider variety of presentational forms may be expressed in person at the

workshop. We also want to state that all of the authors/facilitators are white and we recognize the limitations that this imposes on the way meaning is made.

Presentational Examples:

Andrew:



* Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Victoria: Almost a decade ago I had one of those experiences that has stayed with me like an echo that is still reverberating. I had recently moved across the country to teach in a new doctoral program. I was proud that a group of my students had collaborated on a paper that was presented at the African American pre-conference at an annual research conference that I had been attending for many years. With the pre-conference over, I was absorbed in the main conference activities and in making connections with colleagues when I saw Esperanza, one of my students, walking across the grassy campus. As she approached I asked, "So how is it going?" I was shocked when she burst out with anger. She had attended a session that reported on a professional development intervention in a professional development program in a public university. The research was supported by a large foundation grant. She exclaimed, "All that money! And they don't have one person of color on their staff!" An experienced educator who worked with parents in multi-lingual school communities, Esperanza's distress was palpable. "All that money, and they're wasting it!" Mournfully, she added, "They really don't know what they are doing and they have no idea that they don't know." I was caught off guard. Tired at the end of a demanding academic year in which it had seemed as if everything was about race, I spat out, "Oh Esperanza. Give it a rest!" Feeling that surely this too didn't have to be all about race, I explained to her that the principal investigator was a well-respected member of the professoriate. Then I asked, "Why can't you appreciate what he is accomplishing?" She looked at me with a mixture of hurt and exasperation. "You can 'give it a rest,' Victoria. You can 'rest' any time you

want to. I don't have the privilege of taking 'time out' from racism." The look in her eyes, the fatigue in her voice, and the truth of her statement hit me hard. Here was someone I cared about, and yet I had blurted out with impatience a reaction that showed how little I had actually learned during our year together. I wished I could take it back. That interchange in the bright summer sun has stayed with me; it prods me into action when I think about "resting."

Rose:

A white circle foams
On the blue ocean changing
Shape becomes a heart

Bees gather nectar
Building their hive patiently
The future unknown

An old dead branch cracks
And falls to the earth pointing
Upward to a new twig

The angler's hook waits
The fish contemplates with care
Slowly moves away

Louise: It was early on in the 3-year life of my doctoral cohort group when I experienced a disorienting dilemma that helped me to begin to see my own white supremacist unconsciousness and some of the ways I contribute to keeping systems of domination in place. The cohort attended the premier viewing of a racially provocative documentary film that shows a conversation among men of various races about racism in the United States.

There were a few surprises for me as the film began. For instance, I was amazed to hear from an African American man that it was scary for people of color to be driving out of the city and into the rural town where the film took place. As the film proceeded I was reminded of an earlier incident that had taken place in my cohort, when a white woman asked an African-American man a question I could easily have asked him myself, "But isn't that an example of reverse racism?" I witnessed him blow up in anger toward her. I didn't understand his anger at the time, and I was thankful that I wasn't the one who had asked the question. In the film, a white man struggled to understand the conversation between men of color. The white man was making comments and asking questions that seemed perfectly reasonable to me at the time. One man of color in the film exploded in angry reaction to the white man's questions and comments. At film's end, the white man experienced a profound breakthrough. He was sad as he came to understand how the stories from men of color could actually be true.

I sat silently in fear, hoping and seeming to be invisible, as I watched the reactions of both the white folks and the people of color in the room. I was thankful that my arrogance and unconsciousness had not been exposed to receive all the anger and judgment that was directed at the white man in the film. Through witnessing the experience of this white man in the film and myself in reaction to the film, I quietly began the path of learning about my own unconsciousness about racism.

Daniel:

today i wonder, was the world ever perfect?

hillary versus rudy / s.u.v. crash deaths / the origin of h.i.v.

suicide in Uganda / the ten commandments / www.homelessness.life

change and transformation

the world is wrong / the world must be made different
collusion with the illusion / of control

i am good, i am bad / i am alone, i am powerful / i am asleep / i am racist / i am right, i am wrong
i am missing the point / that on this particular day / perhaps the world is as perfect / as
i am ...

Robin: It was probably the second month of our doctoral cohort's great experiment in a process called Cultural Synergy. As white students and African-American students we had divided into the White Team and the Black Team, spending hours examining our own assumptions and experiences. We then began a process of presenting our 'self-knowing' to the other team, followed by learning to listen to and accept the other team's experience and perspective.

I was a white member of the elite "Design Team," led by one of our faculty. We met to create the process that our cohort and team members would then follow the next weekend. I very deliberately worked to share power with my African-American colleagues in this process, to participate without trying to take over or run the show.

As the Design Team prepared our plan for the next cohort meeting, when each team would experientially present its self-knowing to the other team, we needed to decide which team would begin. "The Black Team should go first," I asserted confidently, "as a way to counter the power imbalance in society, where Black people are given second class status relative to white people." I was pleased with my clear grasp of systemic power and my clarity about how to address this in our cohort.

But my Black Team colleagues were silent. Finally one of them spoke up. "I hate to use the 'R word' (for racism) – but don't you see what you just did? Even as you were trying to balance things out, you were still keeping control – white folks telling us what to do. Again."

I felt the blood drain from my head. Stunned, embarrassed, busted! The construction of entitlement and white privilege so firmly entrenched, that after all this time, and all this work, it's still alive and well inside my consciousness and my behavior. My African-American Design Teammates shrugged; they cared about me, probably loved me – but my mistake was no great surprise to them. It was what they lived with every day....

Potential Applications and Outcomes

Engaging in presentational knowing as a way to create an environment suitable for whole-person learning and/or as a way to access and make meaning of experiential knowing (Yorks & Kasl, 2003) is helpful for transforming deeply held habits of knowing and being. Using presentational knowing is not a replacement for propositional knowing, it is a complement and enhancement to it. We believe that presentational knowing, and an understanding of how Heron's four ways of knowing interact and work together, is important for creating learning situations that are more congruent and address the whole learner. Application of these concepts can be helpful to virtually any educational experience, especially those that are currently out of balance with a should be an over-emphasis on intellectual and propositional knowing.

This paper is about shifting white consciousness through greater attention to presentational knowing. For many white people in the U.S., it is propositional or conceptual knowing that is greatly emphasized over other forms of knowing. There are two opportunities that result from paying greater attention to other forms of knowing. First, in order to transform

consciousness about something as deeply held as one's racial identity, engaging with ways of knowing that can better cope with a large degree of emotional and/or symbolic material is helpful. Secondly, by emphasizing presentational knowing, learners begin to access and validate other learning styles and modes that may be balanced differently in other cultures. By expanding and validating other forms of knowing, white learners can more readily understand themselves as well as others.

Note

1. The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness fosters research and learning about White Supremacist Consciousness. Collective authorship under one name reflects our understanding of the way knowledge is constructed. Members came together originally through a cultural consciousness project at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco; members are Carole Barlas, Elizabeth Kasl, Alec MacLeod, Doug Paxton, Penny Rosenwasser and Linda Sartor. Inquiries are welcome via email: collaborative@eccw.org

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